SOFTWARE & TECH

A Smile As Big As The Moon

PUBLISHED
November 25, 2026

REFERENCE
#1795584105102834

Introduction: More Than a Catchphrase

Some phrases capture the imagination instantly. "A smile as big as the moon" is one of those rare expressions that evokes warmth, wonder, and a sense of limitless possibility. While it may sound like a simple description of joy, for many, it represents a landmark story of perseverance, belief, and the extraordinary potential that lies within every child. This phrase is the title of a profoundly moving true story written by Mike Kersjes, a special education teacher who dared to believe that his students—often dismissed by the system—could achieve the impossible.

In this comprehensive article, we will explore the powerful narrative behind **A Smile As Big As The Moon**, unpack its key themes, and examine why this story continues to inspire educators, parents, and anyone who has ever felt underestimated. We will look at the challenges, the triumphs, and the lasting legacy of a teacher who saw not disabilities but untapped potential. By the end, you will understand why a smile can indeed be as vast and brilliant as the moon, and how that metaphor applies far beyond the pages of a single book.

The Core Story Behind "A Smile As Big As The Moon"

A Teacher's Unconventional Dream

Mike Kersjas (the author's name is sometimes spelled Kersjes) was a special education teacher in a small Michigan town. He worked with students who had been labeled as learning disabled, emotionally impaired, or otherwise incapable of succeeding in a traditional academic setting. These were kids who had grown accustomed to failure, low expectations, and being left behind. But Kersjes saw something different. He saw curiosity, resilience, and a hunger for respect.

In the late 1980s, Kersjes hatched an audacious plan: he wanted to take his students to Space Camp at the U.S. Space & Rocket Center in Huntsville, Alabama. Space Camp was a prestigious program designed for gifted and motivated students, not for kids with learning disabilities. The program required mastery of complex concepts, teamwork under pressure, and rigorous physical challenges. Most people—including Kersjes' colleagues and administrators—thought the idea was absurd. Yet he refused to back down.

Overcoming Institutional Barriers

The journey to Space Camp was not a smooth flight. Kersjes faced a mountain of obstacles. Funding was nonexistent. The school district provided little support. Many parents were skeptical. Even some of the students themselves doubted whether they belonged. To make matters worse, the Space Camp organizers initially rejected the application, citing concerns about safety and the students' ability to keep up with the curriculum.

But Kersjes was relentless. He raised money through car washes, bake sales, and community donations. He wrote letters, made phone calls, and personally advocated for his students at every level. He also worked tirelessly to prepare his class, teaching them science concepts, logarithms, and navigation skills in ways that

accommodated their learning differences. His approach was not about lowering the bar, but about finding creative paths to reach it.

Themes That Resonate in "A Smile As Big As The Moon"

Believing in Student Potential

One of the enduring lessons from this story is the power of high expectations. Kersjes refused to let his students' diagnoses define their futures. He understood that when you treat children as capable and worthy, they often rise to meet that belief. This theme resonates deeply in the world of education, especially for special education teachers who fight against systemic bias every day. The book is a testament to the idea that **every child can learn**, provided they have the right support and someone who believes in them unconditionally.

The Importance of Inclusive Experiences

Space Camp was not designed with special needs students in mind. Yet Kersjes' story forced a conversation about inclusion. The students had to navigate not only academic challenges but also social dynamics—being part of a team with neurotypical peers, handling peer pressure, and managing sensory overload in a high-tech environment. Their success demonstrated that inclusion is not just a policy; it is a practice that requires empathy, flexibility, and courage.

Teamwork and Perseverance

The narrative is rich with examples of students supporting one another. One student might struggle with math but excel at problem-solving under pressure, while another might have difficulty reading but show incredible leadership during simulations. Together, they formed a cohesive team that proved their detractors wrong. Their journey is a classic underdog story, but one rooted in real human triumph.

The Real Impact on Students and Teachers

Transforming Lives Through Experiential Learning

For the students who attended Space Camp, the experience was life-changing. Many went on to pursue careers they had never considered. Some became teachers themselves, inspired by Kersjes' example. The book documents how a single week in Alabama altered the trajectory of entire lives. It illustrates that **experiential learning**—especially when it is immersive, challenging, and respectful—can unlock potential that traditional classrooms sometimes fail to reach.

Changing Perceptions of Special Education

A Smile As Big As The Moon also changed how many educators viewed special education. Before this story, the prevailing assumption was that students with disabilities needed protection, not challenge. Kersjes turned that notion upside down. He showed that risk and challenge are essential for growth, and that limiting students only limits society. The book became a staple in teacher preparation programs and sparked discussions about curricular accessibility and academic rigor for all learners.

Why This Story Still Matters Today

Timeless Lessons for Modern Educators

In an era of standardized testing and accountability metrics, Kersjes' approach reminds us that education is about more than test scores. It is about cultivating character, confidence, and a sense of wonder. Teachers today still face budget cuts, large class sizes, and a lack of resources for specialized instruction. Yet this story proves that one passionate educator can make a difference against all odds. It offers a blueprint for advocacy: start small, build community support, and never underestimate your students.

A Cultural Touchstone for Persistence

Beyond classrooms, the phrase "a smile as big as the moon" has become a metaphor for achieving the seemingly impossible. It appears in motivational speeches, leadership seminars, and personal development contexts. The image of a smile that is as wide and bright as the moon suggests boundless joy stemming from hard-won achievement. The book was also adapted into a television movie, further cementing its place in popular culture.

Key Takeaways from the Book

- Never let labels define a person's potential. The students in Kersjes' class were labeled, but they proved they were so much more.
- Preparation is the foundation of success. Kersjes spent months teaching his students advanced concepts in ways they could grasp.
- Advocacy requires grit. Fundraising, lobbying school boards, and convincing parents took relentless effort.
- Teamwork bridges gaps. The students had to rely on each other's strengths to complete the Space Camp simulations.
- Joy comes from achievement. The smile at the end was earned through struggle, making it truly monumental.

How to Apply These Lessons in Your Own Life

For Parents and Educators

If you work with children who face learning challenges, take a page from Kersjes' book. Start by asking: What does this child dream about? Then ask: How can I help build a bridge to that dream? It may require unconventional methods, extra patience, and a thick skin against skeptics. But the payoff—a child's belief in themselves—is immeasurable. Consider incorporating **hands-on projects**, field trips, and mentorship programs that give students authentic experiences.

For Anyone Facing a Big Goal

The story is also for anyone setting an ambitious goal. When people tell you it cannot be done, remember that Kersjes was told the same thing. Break your goal into small steps, surround yourself with supporters, and keep your eyes on the horizon. The moon may seem far away, but a prepared, persistent team can get there. And when you finally look back at the journey, you will understand why the smile is so big.

Conclusion: The Lasting Light of a Big Smile

A Smile As Big As The Moon is far more than a feel-good story about a nice teacher and his students. It is a radical testament to human potential, a call to action for educational equity, and a reminder that our greatest achievements often come from the journeys we thought were impossible. Mike Kersjes showed that with belief, preparation, and sheer determination, ordinary people—even those written off by society—can accomplish extraordinary things. That is why this story, and that smile, continue to shine as brightly as the moon itself.

Whether you are an educator, a parent, a student, or simply someone who loves a great underdog tale, let this narrative inspire you to look at the world with bigger eyes and a fuller heart. Because sometimes, all it takes to move mountains—or reach the stars—is someone who sees your smile as big as the moon.

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