

Mike NICHOLS



Free market paths to better lives

The last two in a long line of eight brothers and sisters, 17-year-old Aaron and 13-year-old Ildeliza Martin attend different schools.

Aaron, a rugby player and scholar carrying an A average, is a senior at St. Anthony High School on Milwaukee's south side who plans to study finance and management in college. Like virtually all students there, he benefits from the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program.

Ildeliza gets a ride each morning to Morgandale, a Milwaukee public school where she has learned to read and write and play soccer and basketball in the same way other kids do, though a little less rapidly because she has Down syndrome.

Aaron and Ildeliza's parents, Jose and Ninfa, have no complaints about the way she has been treated. Morgandale, they say, is a good place. But they're not sure which school Ildeliza, who will remain in school until she is 21, will attend next.

While schools in the choice program do take children with disabilities, they are often limited by finances and by the layout of older buildings. Jose has some qualms, meanwhile, about South Division, the high school some of his older children attended. South Division, he says, can be a rough place, and Ildeliza is the sort of gentle child who likes to pray out loud before she eats.

If a special needs scholarship program were to become law in Wisconsin, children like her could have more options to attend different public or private schools. Such programs in other states give children with special needs the same nurturing and opportunities already offered to their siblings — kids like Aaron.

I have a special interest, I will concede, in kids with special needs, mostly because of my brother-in-law Augie,

who had Down syndrome. Back when I was a newspaper columnist, I wrote about Augie at the end of his life, and it's the one thing I've ever written that we have framed and hanging in our home.

But I have an interest in special needs scholarships for another reason as well. Last year, before I took over the presidency of WPRI, I wrote a WPRI white paper explaining how Wisconsin's current system for educating kids with special needs is deficient. They deserve a better path and the opportunity to pursue the most fulfilling lives possible.

That, in fact, is precisely how I think about WPRI's mission. Through research, commentary, events, our magazine, podcasts and even video, we hope to show the value of free markets — whether it be in education or in pursuit of economic prosperity — in helping all Wisconsinites achieve the lives and happiness they deserve.

WPRI celebrates success stories like siblings Aaron, 17, and Ildeliza, 13.

You can find out what we're up to at our newly designed website, www.wpri.org. WPRI will always offer high-quality, fair and non-partisan research. But we hope to tell more stories about folks like Aaron and Ildeliza, who will benefit from those policies as well.

Aaron has a diligence about him. He credits St. Anthony for its focus on academics and its individualized attention. His parents say he has never missed a day of school. He "might have a chance for a college scholarship," says Jose, who emigrated from Mexico and never had the opportunity to earn a high school or college degree.

Ildeliza, friendly and trusting, likes to read books like *High School Musical* and to hang out with her much younger nieces and nephews. If she qualifies for a scholarship to attend high school, says Jose, "it would be great." If not, he says he hopes someone else with special needs will someday have what he calls "the privilege" of attending a school like the one Aaron has enjoyed. ■

Formerly a senior fellow at the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, Mike Nichols became its president this past summer when George Lightbourn retired.