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Eye-opening Inclusion

Going into sophomore year my eyes were on football and my mind full of optimism. Tenth grade. No longer the fresh meat walking along the very edge of each wall to avoid the towering seniors stomping over you. Sophomore year is the time when you take your first true steps in finding who you are and who you will become. It is also football season, obviously.

What I had envisioned for my sophomore year on the field was always one thing: dominance. Running routes, catching footballs, scoring touchdowns, to be the best. That vision soon changed, by one class that empowered me to shape the rest of my life, for something far more rewarding. (I) Walking into 4th period on the very first day of school there was an undeniable, unwavering awkwardness from my head to my toes.

“What have I gotten myself into?” I asked my mind on replay.

Hearing my sister’s words in the back of my mind, “Give it a chance, you will love it,” was the only thing keeping me from packing up my pride and walking straight out.

After 47 years of embarrassingly awkward loneliness later, I could hear the footsteps of my teacher rounding the corner.

“My name is Mrs. Bohrer and welcome to Peer to Peer Leadership,” my teacher announced.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. My sister signed me up for the class that hangs out with special needs kids,” this thought relapsed in my mind. “I have to get out of here,” I told myself. “I am not going to spend my sophomore year, the year of me, to be an unpaid aide.”

Mrs. Bohrer continued, “You are all sitting before me today because something inspired you, whether you have a family member with an intellectual disability or you know someone who has struggled with those types of issues. Maybe you were drawn this classes principle or just, you had to take one last elective to graduate. I am glad you’re here.”

“Well I am absolutely none of those things,” I muffled under my breath.

Although I did not want to be in the class, I decided to wait until the period was over and hear what she had to say.

(II) “If you take away nothing from your time in this class, I want you to remember that what makes us different is what makes us unique, and we are more alike than we are different,” Mrs. Bohrer personified. That quote is not new. It is not something everyone has never heard before. It certainly is not a quote you do not hear every teacher say at one point or another. However, what made this instance different is the context, the kids she works with every day, and the belief in what she was saying, through her voice and her eyes. “Peer to Peer Leadership is a class where general education and special education collide for the better, fostering rich, true friendships that extend beyond the classroom,” Mrs. Bohrer proclaimed.

“But where do you even begin?” I questioned in my mind. Talking to special needs students was not foreign language to me, but friendships that are strong and true with those students certainly was.

In that moment, during my 4th period class, on my first day of sophomore year, my life’s direction took a U-turn when I met one of my best friends, someone who will forever hold a place in my heart. For the sake of his own confidentiality I will call him Chris. Chris walked into our classroom that day with his head down and his eyes admiring the 30-plus year-old tile floors.

When I first tried to talk with Chris, he acknowledged my presence with the sincerest of all welcoming’s, “Hi,” without raising his head. Me, having no idea how to attack this situation on my first day, went with the natural approach: Ice breakers. Favorite ice cream, favorite color, favorite movie, favorite subject in school, so pretty much favorite anything and everything. You can already guess where that got me…...nowhere. You were probably wondering when the football was going to come into play.

I decided to branch out. “If Chris doesn’t have a favorite anything, I’ll need to try a different approach,” I thought to myself. “So, Chris,” I said as I exhaled. “If you don’t have a favorite anything, then what on earth do you like to do for fun?” I said with exuberance.

Chris raised his head slowly, brought his eyes from the floor tiles to the middle of my shirt and whispered, “I like football.”

I instantly attacked him with excitement, “You like football! I play football. I watch football all the time. Who is your favorite team? No. Who is your favorite player?” Chris immediately shutdown. His head lowered and eyes gazed down to the floor.

“I don’t know,” he spoke. (III) That is when the realization hit me, everything rapidly rounded to a full circle. It is not about me. It was never about me. This day, this class, this season, this year, it is not about me. I quickly apologized to Chris for startling him, then quickly and calmly told him that I like football too and would love to talk about football with him sometime. (IX) That is when our friendship grew.

(X) All it took was 50 minutes in Peer to Peer Leadership to come to one simple realization; it is not about what I can do for me, but about what I can do for others. From then on, I walked down the hallway like everyone else. Not frightened by the overpowering seniors or because I was no longer a freshman, but because I was apart of something greater than myself. That extends further than any classroom or field could ever extend.