

I can lead my school and community to become a bully-free place for individuals with autism and developmental disabilities by helping others to embrace differences and see the joy in doing so. Teenagers are generally self-serving, and tend to cut down anyone who stands apart from the group. In my experience of being the little sister to my autistic brother, I've spent my life wrestling with the difficulties of intolerance that permeates in our society towards the autistic. From defending my brother against the ignorant, to laughing with him as we go on rides at an amusement park, I believe we can achieve a place of acceptance for all.

The first step in becoming bully-free is to understand what developmental delays are. In my experience from living with my brother for 18 years, I can see that socializing is difficult. During April of my junior year, I met with my teachers and convinced them to share a video entitled, "Amazing Things Happen – by Alexander Amelines, as a way of spreading autism awareness. This film gives an introduction to non-autistic audiences about autism, in a fun and easy-to-understand way. It can be used to spark a conversation. Another great video is "Autism TMI Virtual Reality Experience," which shows what's possibly going on when a person melts down. It offers a perspective of what happens when an autistic person goes into a public space, like a mall or school hallway. Empathy is a great educational tool. Everyone has been somewhere and felt overwhelmed by things that are typical. It gives us common ground.

The second step is educating others. I planned on forming an Autism Awareness Club in my senior year before the pandemic hit. Autism Awareness Club members should be connected to autism in some way, or simply passionate about helping others. The mission of the club would be to educate through experiential learning. We would receive training on how best to successfully interact. The members of the group would be rewarded with "volunteer-time," but also with self-gratification that can only be achieved through helping others.

The third step is fundraising and having fun. Gathering money would allow more opportunities for connecting, socializing, and fun - for the autistic and typical alike. It serves the self-interest of non-autistic participants, while creating friendships through their interactions, resulting in a drastic decrease in bullying. By sharing fun memories, and tailoring them to meet the needs of the delayed, the neuro-typical peers would feel connected, maybe even protective, of their new friends, and everyone wins. Once, I helped create a dance class for autistic children. Each of the children got a typical child-partner to help them learn group dances heard at parties, like Cotton-Eyed Joe. All of the participants had fun, volunteers and dancers alike. It was magical to see all of the children shine. By reaching out to those with delays, and bringing us together in a thoughtfully fun way, I can lead my school and community into a bully-free space for all.