

How can I lead my school and community to become a bully-free place for individuals with autism and developmental disabilities? That truly is a good question and a topic I can personally and strongly relate to. My whole life, I have gained a unique perspective and fortunate enough to be surrounded by people with autism and developmental disabilities..

My mom is a Principal for a Nassau BOCES Middle School. Since I was a toddler I have been going to events she held such as Sports Night, School Productions, BINGO night and many more. My mom is deeply dedicated and involved in the lives of her students. I have seen first hand how her decisions and actions truly impact the quality of life for her students. I was surprised to see how bullying is a real problem and how individuals with disabilities are truly affected by it. Negative words, derogatory comments and ridicule are so damaging. Individuals with disabilities need to be protected because sometimes their innocence helps victimize them. I witnessed my mom and the staff that work with her advocate for the rights of these students. She included them in everyday activities that all of their peers had access to. This increases their self esteem and sense of worth. The better that they feel about themselves, the better self advocates they can be.

Second, for the past 3 years I have attended Calhoun High school. At Calhoun we have a very intensive special education program. I have come to learn that it is filled with the most amazing students. Luckily, there are so many ways to get involved. I am an Officer in the Breakfast Club and Coach the Special Needs Bowling league. Through this experience I have developed relationships with these students. As I travel throughout the school on a day to day basis, I run into them. We always have a fun exchange. I think this is good for my typically developing peers to see. They can witness that all students are simply students, like us and deserve the respect that I give them. I want to lead my school in being that role model of how to interact with individuals with disabilities. Additionally if I see anyone treating them poorly, I step up and put a stop to it and want to lead others in doing the same.

Lastly, having a sister with a disability and watching her struggle through the years with bullying against her. I have developed a need to protect others. I feel that advocating for people with autism and disabilities is my responsibility. I lead by example and encourage others to do the same. I have learned from my sister as she is a peer advocate for others with disabilities.

In conclusion, my life's experiences have enabled me to lead my school and community to fight against bullying individuals with autism and disabilities. I will continue to do what I love. I will continue to role model and lead by example.