

# Connect-Ability



A newsletter on disabilities awareness prepared by and for students

## A message from Maria Neira, NYSUT vice president

The remarkable students serving on *Connect-Ability's* editorial board always have a surprise for me when I visit their writing workshops held at Headquarters in March and August every year. I enjoy being welcomed into their writing activities and having them share with me what they are learning about disabilities. Their communication skills are unusually good, but they are always searching for new ways to tap into each member's ability to contribute.

Expecting the unexpected from them, I was still baffled by the sounds coming from the auditorium at Headquarters shortly after their arrival this past August. Peeking in the door, I was greeted with a circle of students each holding a large plastic bucket and two drum sticks. One of them handed me a long wooden box, pointed to a chair and invited me to join their circle. Knowing I am not very musically talented and lacking confidence, I started to shake my head and said I preferred to listen to them, but they wouldn't take no for an answer. I had just returned from a trip to Africa where drumming is a part of life so I sat down next to Isabel, one of our youngest board members. Then I was asked to start the drumming circle off with a beat of my own making. I tentatively began to drum and what fun it was!

My initial doubt about a connection between drumming and disability instantly disappeared. I immediately felt what each of the students was feeling. We were a team, sharing our unique voices, including everyone in our circle, listening to one another "speak." Eye-hand coordination, large and small muscle skills, creativity, self-expression were all part of our drumming experience. Every one of us was fully engaged in making music together. As different individuals were called upon to "lead," we all realized we were leaders.

As we followed one another's lead, we all experienced the value of teamwork. Barriers to communication were reduced as we listened to one another. Our drumming circle made a good learning environment.

In this issue of *Connect-Ability*, teachers and students will find an addition to the

disabilities awareness toolkit started last year. We have added drumming circles which can be used effectively in classrooms and communities to help foster a better understanding of inclusion and improve our ability to appreciate what each individual student has to offer to the team. Thanks to the *Connect-Ability* editorial board members for inviting me into their circle. Let us know if you start a circle of your own.



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## Editorials



**Cassie Ford,**  
**Co-editor**

It is such a great pleasure to be co-editor of the 2012 *Connect-Ability* newsletter with Jeffrey and Katie. I am really glad my older sisters, Frances and Bridget, got me involved in *Connect-Ability* during my freshman year of high school in 2006.

I have met a lot of really great people, learned how to be a writer and team mate. The newsletter also makes me realize that you should not feel bad because you have a disability. Just feel proud of who you are. Come join the *Connect-Ability* team and share your thoughts. We always have a great time at the March and August workshops and learn so much. Don't worry; we will be supportive of your awesome ideas. Here's my message to you out there: **EXPRESS YOURSELF**



**Jeffrey Twitty,**  
**Co-editor**

In this world there are countless stories to be told by everyone and anyone, and it seems that the only thing to rival the amount of stories in this world are the ways we express them. Through music, poetry or even dance, we are always able to communicate our points by showing and playing; rather than just telling. It is also with the help of assistive technology, the topic of a recent *Connect-Ability* workshop,

that more and more people are able to share in more ways today than ever before.

Here at *Connect-Ability*, our main focus of every workshop is inclusion everywhere. By this we do not mean just inclusion of all people, but inclusion of all ideas as well. While we have along the way learned so much about the importance of inclusion of students with disabilities in the classroom, it is of-

ten brought home that these lessons should follow everyone, everywhere. As a *Connect-Ability* member, I have taken part in poetry readings, interviews, drum circles and even puppet shows! But, no matter what it may be, it all expresses the same mantra: that everybody with or without a disability needs an advocate, a friend. Through this newsletter, through our stories, we have the power to bring those words to life. This newsletter serves as both a "documented advocate" and reminder for students and adults alike to make this a better and more aware world for every idea and individual, one friend at a time.

So, sound exciting? Well, why not join? We are more than open to any new ideas that you may have, and even more excited to share them with the board. Even those who may not have any ideas just yet, or are a little less than thrilled about reading poems or interviewing in a group, join us anyway! See what we're about, and if you don't find your niche, then suggest it as another great idea! Remember, there are countless stories to every person, but it's all in the way they are expressed that makes them yours. Find your way!

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## New Art Editor



**Katie Dingman,**  
**Art editor**

Katie Dingman, our new art editor, is a 10th-grade student at Canajoharie High School who loves music as well as art and enjoyed drumming at the last writing workshop. Her mom is a teacher and saw an issue of *Connect-Ability* at her school when Katie was an eighth grader. She recommended her to the board knowing that it was just the thing for Katie who

was looking for a way to communicate that kids with disabilities and kids without disabilities are more alike than different. Although it's true that Katie makes a point of valuing her "differences" and respecting everyone else's, she was chosen as the new art editor because she had experienced the power of art (especially drawing and sculpting) to relax and help her focus on school work. She loves Japanese animation and creating her own characters in clay. Art, music and drama, too, are Katie's strong points. She has made many videos to introduce the themes of each of the *Connect-Ability* writing workshops. We welcome her to her new role on the board.

## InvenTeam Visits *Connect-Ability*



### Why did Berlin MS/HS students come to a *Connect-Ability* workshop?

Nine students from Berlin Middle and High School visited the editorial board to demonstrate their AT invention, a device to make sports safer for people with hearing impairments. Part of an InvenTeam, one of only 14 schools in the nation to receive a grant from the Lemelson-Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Berlin students ranging from sixth-graders to seniors, talked about how they took their motto, “making life better one invention at a time,” and developed something that would making skiing and other sports easier for their classmates with hearing impairments.

### What exactly did the Berlin HS students invent and how did it relate to disability?

They invented an adaptive sports device that keeps a student with a hearing impairment safer while engaged in outdoor sports by warning him of people or vehicles behind him.



*Hearing Aid Prototype for Skiers*

### Was it helpful that they brought their invention along with them? If yes, why?

Yes, because we saw it in action, and it looked simple but it did the job. It was amazing to see how professional it looked. They had taken a plastic container, a circuit board, a computer chip and a 9 volt battery and turned it into something amazing.

### Why did it take so many people to invent something? Was teamwork important?

Everybody on the team had something different to offer to the final product, and it was amazing to see how they all respected one another’s ideas and work. Just the age range (from sixth grade to senior in high school) of the students was surprising. They were like a high-tech family working together.

### Did it matter that none of the Berlin HS students who spoke to us had a disability?

Their bus driver has a son with a hearing impairment, and they had experience skiing and noticing other students on the slopes who had hearing impairments. It was great that they wanted to make it safer for kids with disabilities so they could be included in winter sports. That went right along with our theme at *Connect-Ability*. You don’t have to have a disability to be interested.

### What was the most important thing you learned from their experience?

Never under estimate the ways in which inclusion can be something we can all work on in every aspect of our lives. Take a lesson from Berlin Middle and High School students and get involved.

## Guru David Grapka introduces AT to *Connect-Ability* students

Introduced as an AT guru, David Grapka told the *Connect-Ability* editorial board students that he dislikes that depiction of himself and always responds to it by saying, “You are the U in guru!” But as staff development coordinator in Instructional Resources at the Capital Region BOCES, David is used to knowing everything there is to know about AT and sharing what he knows in the liveliest and most interactive ways with his audiences. He gave *Connect-Ability* students a chance to use and learn more about AT to kick off their March workshop. Each student received a “remote control” through which they could communicate with David as he asked questions. Their responses went directly to a screen where they could see and track their answers to his questions without anyone knowing who had given which answer. It was a great way to learn about AT while using it.

David’s handout entitled “The ABC’s of Assistive Technology” helped guide the discussion about technology tools which should be “available to all students to help them achieve independence, develop peer relationships and acquire 21st century skills.” The handout helped explain some

*Continued on page 14*

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# Four editorial board members tell what they learned about AT

## AT Redefines Disability

**Jeffrey Twitty**

The days of assistive technology, or AT, meaning simply canes, have long since passed. The technology of the past 50 years, (most notably the last 10) has brought about a new definition of not just what it means to have a disability, but what it means to be a student.

Today there is a vast diversity of technology used to assist in the classroom. With the old methods of blackboards and textbooks being replaced by tools such as Smart Boards and the iPad, the classroom has become more interactive for all students. Certain programs such as text enlargement and audio output available with these technologies may help the students with disabilities get far more out of their classroom experience. However, these assistive technologies extend far beyond the classroom. Much of the AT that was originally developed for people with disabilities has even integrated into the everyday lives of all people. This is evident by seeing “everyday technology” in the form of automatic doors or sound triggered lighting.

Even today advanced software and adaptations are becoming increasingly commonplace, and fitting into this “everyday



technology” category. With the ongoing innovations of today, especially in the field of nanotechnology, seeing AT

enter in to the world of more advanced and helpful robotics is becoming less of a “Jetson Dream” and more feasible.

These new and diverse methods of learning through AT may very well change what it means to have a disability. Would we really consider someone to be disabled if he learns more effectively from a tablet or something more interactive than a blackboard? Could it be that someone who comprehends better by hearing than by reading material is considered disabled? No, we would just see both of these people as just needing different tools to learn, and with a stronger sense of metacognition in a school setting, the more that will ultimately get accomplished. As assistive technology becomes more and more common throughout everyone’s everyday life, it can help to bridge a gap between those with, and those without disabilities so that the *real* learning can begin.”

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## Assistive Technology in the Classroom

**Nina Kaledin**

When discussing assistive technology, many people do not understand what it is or how it can help people. Assistive technology is most commonly known to help people with disabilities complete tasks that can sometimes be difficult. But assistive technology can just be that extra thing that makes everyday life a little easier.

Assistive technology can change a classroom environment. Sometimes it is difficult for everyone to learn the same way, and assistive technology allows for adaptations in the field of education. It is important to take a different approach for different people, and assistive technology greatly helps students with or without disabilities learn and grow.

Hearing aids are a great example of assistive technology that can change a person’s classroom experience. Without the help of a hearing aid, a person that cannot hear might struggle to read lips and fully understand what the assignment is. A hearing aid can help the person learn and receive an education that they truly deserve. Some people may think that because this person is different, that they should not do the same things that everyone else is doing. But learning is learning, no matter if you’re reading a book or having a book read to you.

Other forms of assistive technology that are used in a classroom are keyboards with Braille, desks accommodated to fit wheelchairs and computers with spelling assists and voice recognition. Many different types of assistive technology help create a classroom environment where everyone can learn and achieve new goals.

Advancements in assistive technology make the classroom a place of greater equality for all students. Assistive technology can broaden a student’s education, and allow for all students to develop their brains in their own way. Every student wants to achieve the highest goals in their education,

but not every student can do this the same way. Assistive technology helps students take a different approach to learning, which allows the classroom and the students to thrive and grow.



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## AT for All

### Olivia Kim

Assistive technology? You may think the only examples of AT are wheelchairs and hearing aids. Well, think again because the list of AT devices goes on and on. It is any device or piece of equipment designed to help make someone's life easier or safer. A cane or glasses are two more examples.

Right about now you're probably thinking that AT is mainly for someone with a disability. Wrong again! Think about it. You use AT every day. Don't you use a remote to change the channels on your TV? You probably use a switch on the wall so you don't have to actually walk over to the lamp and turn it off. AT is everywhere. That's what makes it so diverse.

My school, along with many others, uses an interactive white board called a Promethean Board. Research has shown that this kind of AT appeals to students of all learning types and keeps students engaged in the lesson due to its unique features.

Today many new types of AT are in the classroom. Black-



boards and text books are being replaced by tools such as Smart Boards and tablets. These devices which have special programs such as text enlargement and audio output make the classroom more interactive for everyone including students with disabilities.

Much of the AT that was originally developed to help people with disabilities has been integrated into our everyday lives. Automatic doors, motion detected lighting, specialized software with a variety of adaptations are increasingly commonplace. AT is helping everyone.

As a result of the new and diverse methods of learning that AT allows, the definition of disability may change as well. Having a disability no longer means you have to learn in a different classroom. You can simply use the technology to stay with your classmates. AT is building a bridge between students with and without disabilities so that real learning can begin.

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## The Fantastic World of the Dynavox

### An interview with D.J. Reinhardt

#### Cassie Ford

**Q.** How old were you, D.J., when you received the Dynavox for the first time?

**A.** I was 13. Before I had it I used a speaking enhancement device. I would speak into a microphone, and the device would say the words for me. It actually increased the volume of my voice so people could hear me.

**Q.** When you first got the Dynavox what was your feeling about it?

**A.** I felt good about it because it would help me communicate better.

**Q.** How does it work?

**A.** I press the common words on the machine, and it pronounces them for me.

**Q.** Who gave you the Dynavox?

**A.** I got it from my school district.

**Q.** Besides school, do you use it in other settings?

**A.** I took it to Camp Howe when I went camping there.

**Q.** When you're not using it, where do you keep it?

**A.** At school.

**Q.** How would you describe life before and after Dynavox?

**A.** Before I had the Dynavox it was hard for people to understand me. If I said a sentence, I would have to repeat it so people would understand me. After I got it, I would type in a sentence and people would understand me better.

**Q.** Are there any disadvantages to using it?

**A.** It breaks sometimes.

**Q.** How do you explain to people what it is?

**A.** Yes, I do have to explain. I say that it helps me communicate.

**Q.** Will you have the Dynavox when you head off to college this fall?

**A.** No. I will have my echo device instead because it has a computer inside the machine (an echo device can transition computing to speech output).

**Q.** What would you say to all the people out there who use different kinds of AT?

**A.** Don't be afraid to try new technologies throughout your lifetime. You never know if you might need them some day.

## Puppets and Disability

How can puppets help us call attention to the role assistive technology plays for students with disabilities? The editorial board members answered that question when they met for their March writing workshop. They built puppets and wrote scripts for three puppet shows demonstrating how AT can enhance the learning power of all students. Determined to add something new to their teacher toolkit to help teachers make elementary students more knowledgeable of disabili-

ties, they agreed that puppetry would engage those students. Attention grabbing and fun, puppets are a good way to introduce a sometimes difficult subject. Using an alien theme (on the planet Nukk which means “puppet” in Estonia) they wrote and performed three plays. The scripts follow with illustrations by Fahiyim Williams who drew from photographs of the puppets.

## The iTab Saves the Day

**Setting:** Classroom on Planet Nukk

**Disability:** reading and language-based

**Characters:** Zig, Ms. Almegist (teacher), Jaccon (classmate and friend), Tensie (classmate)

**Plot:** The teacher asks the students to read. Zig does not raise his hand to volunteer so the teacher calls on him. He has an invisible disability – reading is difficult for him. This leads to mockery and makes Zig feel bad whenever he has to read out loud. His teacher, Ms. Almegist, with the help of another student, Jaccon, finds a solution. The solution is a computer in class which would enlarge the font and would help him read and say the words correctly.

**The scene is set:** On the Planet Nukk in the town of Nugg, Ms. Almegist is preparing for a reading lesson at school.

**Ms. Almegist:** Who would like to read about what we will be doing for our project? Zig?

**Zig:** Are you sure you want to call on me? I didn't have my hand up?

**Ms. Almegist:** Just try.

*Other students whisper*

**Tensie:** What's wrong with him?

**Daze:** What's taking him so long?

**Ms. Almegist:** Continue, Zig.

**Zig:** And the scie...scien...scientific stu...stud...study of the homo...homo...sap...i...ens. There will be a t... www...o p..a...g...eee...es.sss.sss...aaayyyy.

**Tensie:** Really! He can't read!

**Ms. Almegist:** We should all be respectful, everyone has his own strengths.

*The bell rings. Another student approaches Zig.*

**Jaccon:** I noticed your trouble reading. I have trouble reading too, but I use this iTab that makes the words bigger and helps me read.

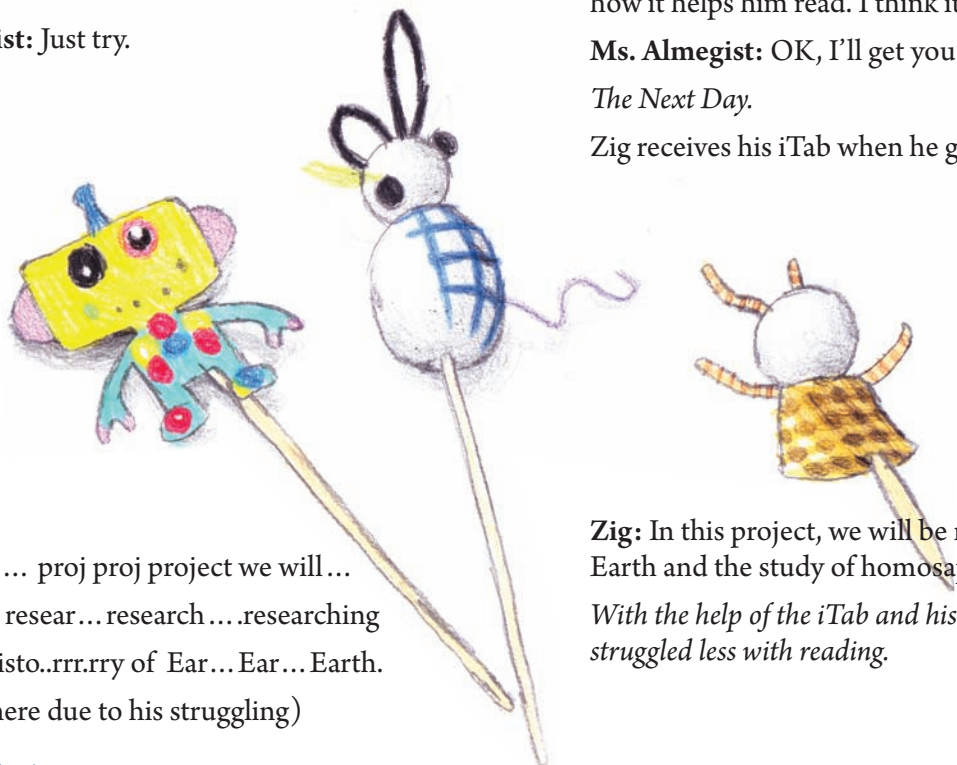
*Zig talks to his teacher with what Jaccon said.*

**Zig:** I talked to Jaccon. He told me about the iTab and how it helps him read. I think it could help me too.

**Ms. Almegist:** OK, I'll get you the iTab.

*The Next Day.*

Zig receives his iTab when he gets to school.



*Artwork by Fahiyim Williams*

**Zig:** In this... proj proj project we will...  
be re...re...resea...research...researching  
the...hist.histo...rrr.rry of Ear...Ear...Earth.  
(Zig stops here due to his struggling)

**Zig:** In this project, we will be researching the history of Earth and the study of homosapiens.

*With the help of the iTab and his friends at school, Zig struggled less with reading.*



## The Oculi

**Setting:** An elementary school on planet Nukk.

**Disability:** Visual Impairment.

**Characters:** Sister Murphy (teacher), Vladimir, Zed, Daisy, Glenn and Bugsy (students).

**Plot:** Classmates who are having trouble seeing the board in their classroom ask for help from their classmates and teacher. Working together they find a way to solve their classmates' problem.

**Sister Murphy:** Hi class, welcome! Find new seats today, and we will start our warm up activity. Answer the questions posted on the board.

**Vladimir:** Excuse me Sister Murphy, I can't see the board.

**Zed:** Yeah, I can't see the board either.

**Sister Murphy:** Oh, maybe it's because I put you in the back. Glenn, Bugsy, can you switch seats with them?

**Glenn and Bugsy:** Yeah, of course.

*They Rearrange*

**Sister Murphy:** Do the questions on the board now, please.

**Zeb:** I still can't see the board.

**Vladimir:** I can't either.

*Daisy looks them up and down*

**Daisy:** Hmm, maybe it's because you both only have one eye, and everybody else has two.

**Harley:** I wonder how we can change things so that everyone can see the board in the same way?

**Bugsy:** I've heard about this thing called assistive technology. It's supposed to make everyone be able to do the same things.

**Glenn:** I've heard of this device called Oculi. It's supposed to make it so that people who only have one eye can see completely clearly the way everyone else can.

**Sister Murphy:** I'll go to the office and see if they have any! (She leaves and almost instantly returns). Oh great, I found some Oculi in the store room! Somebody must have ordered them and forgotten to distribute them to the students.

**Vlad:** (Tries on the Oculi) I can see perfectly now! Thank you so much!

**Zed:** Me too, this is great!

**Daisy:** I'm so glad that assistive technology gave Vlad and Zed access to learning like we all have!

# Drumming Circles Inspire Students to Write Their Friends

Dear Kiynat,

It's another one of my letters! This one's about the writing workshop I've told you about. Remember, Connect-Ability? You should, considering how much I've told you about it! Well, in case you forgot, Connect-Ability is a group of teenagers who meet at NYSUT and work on writing and talk about people with disabilities and related topics.

Well, this workshop has been more about making noise rather than making words. It was all about drumming! It's a nice change from just capturing feelings with words, as those pesky things can only go so far. We're not talking about professional drumming, either. The rock band level is not what the aim was (that would require more training than two days gave us). But who knew that five gallon buckets could sound so good?

The main drum that we used as a model was the djembe. It's a drum that originates from Africa, which makes it pretty neat within itself. Just imagine how far music has spread across the world! They're made from natural parts of the world around us, including trees and goat skin. The writing coach, Tom, actually has one and brought it in to show us! You have to tilt it sideways when you play it so the sound can come out of the bottom, which is hollow. If you pay attention, you can feel the vibrations that the sounds actually make. In fact, most percussion instruments allow one to feel the vibrations that they make when struck!

Drumming engages so many senses, which it always a great thing to consider as something everyone can enjoy, including those who cannot hear well.

As there was no need for formal training to play the drums that we had, we were able to start our music making sessions pretty quickly! We all played whatever our hearts desired, too. You would think that if we all did that at the same time it would be a mess. It was surprising to hear all the different beats blend into something that sounds amazing. We did that several times, and each time it just always worked out without any kind of coordination. I can see how anyone can simply jump in when in a drumming circle. Kids with disabilities could find a lot of fun by doing some drumming in a group. Without much need for tedious training and investing time, kids can easily show off their creative side. Or any side, for that matter. It all works out when we're together.

Like I mentioned before, we were able to engage a lot more senses than our hearing. You could literally feel most of the beats being played because we were all so loud. We could see each other too. Imagine listening to something that sounds unified, but watching everyone playing her own beat. At one point, Tom turned off the lights so we had to rely on all of our other senses. That just made everything a lot more interesting. Remind me to try and find a local drumming circle, or at least promise me you'll join me in a duo drum session soon.

Well, got to go. I'll talk to you later!

Sincerely, Lauren

We learned a sense of connection. At first, to play, but a little experience with instruments not that good there are no away on the drum very relaxed and lose myself in their own rhythms, we even tried drum

It has been an experience with the drum. We want to be so into it didn't stop tired.



Our August meeting was different from all the rest. We used drumming and discovered how it can create inclusion for kids with or without disabilities. Not being very musically talented, banging on the drum helped me feel relaxed, yet in control. Everyone added a beat giving everyone a chance to express themselves. Drumming is a great way of seeing the value of inclusion because it is limitless; there are no mistakes. Each person's contribution to the drum circle created amazing music. Drumming gave us all a voice.

Sydney

Drumming in groups enables non-social/social/aggressive/passive people alike to each be able to do their own thing, without worry of ridicule or comparison. Playing drums in the dark is also a bit entertaining, though everyone should be wary of where they swing their drumsticks.

Emily

...d that drumming gives people of control, forms a social ...n and it's just a fun thing to ...rst I was a little nervous ...cause after only having very ...ience with musical ... my sense of rhythm was ...d. But after learning that ...mistakes, I began to bang ...um. As a result, I felt ...I felt like I could just ...he music. We tried our ...learned new ones and ...ming in the dark.

Katie

I bet you're wondering how drumming relates to disabilities awareness. It's a great tool for teachers to inform students about disabilities because kids of every age can drum and teachers can use it as a form of inclusion, teaching students how important including everyone is. Also, there are no mistakes so no one can feel different or unwelcomed. I believe that drum circles are a great way to teach kids. I learned a lot myself.

Harry

We got to decorate our own drums, and we all sat in a circle and had a jam session! It was not only beautiful music, but it was also really soothing. It released all my stress and it was so much fun as well! I was very surprised that all of us sounded so good when we had no "formal" training or practice at all! It also helped me clear my mind before writing. At first, I was a little hesitant but, I am so glad that I opened my mind to the new experience because it was enriching in so many ways.

Olivia

After I had the chance to drum, I thought of you and our times at Best Buddies. You might want to consider having a drum circle with the Best Buddies organization at school. This experience was just incredible. Even when we broke off into our own patterns we sounded as one group together with the beat! The drums, the sounds and the overall flow are just so connecting. It gives everyone a chance to speak through the power of drumming. It makes me wish that we had tried it in our high school!

Forest

...n a great ...trying out the ...en tapping on ...it makes you ...move your feet ...eat. We just got ...he music, we ...pp until we got

Cassie

## Special Wings!

**SCENE ONE: In the park on Planet Nukk.**

**Valoree:** Hi, I'm Princess Bella. I live on planet Nukk. I'm a fashionistaaaa!

**Katie:** Hi, I'm Princess Alice. My favorite color is orange and I love to spend time with my fellow princess friends!

**Sarah:** Hi, I'm Princess Heather. My favorite color is purple!

**Tereasa:** My name is Princess Maria. My favorite animal is a tiger!

**Syd:** Hi, my name is Princess Cenndeya. I love shopping and dressing up!

**Alysa:** Hey there! I'm Princess Rosely. I love spending time with my best friends! We have so much fun together!

**SCENE TWO: At a park**

All the alien girls are together walking through the beautiful park. Everyone is humming a happy song.

**Katie:** I'm getting so hungry!

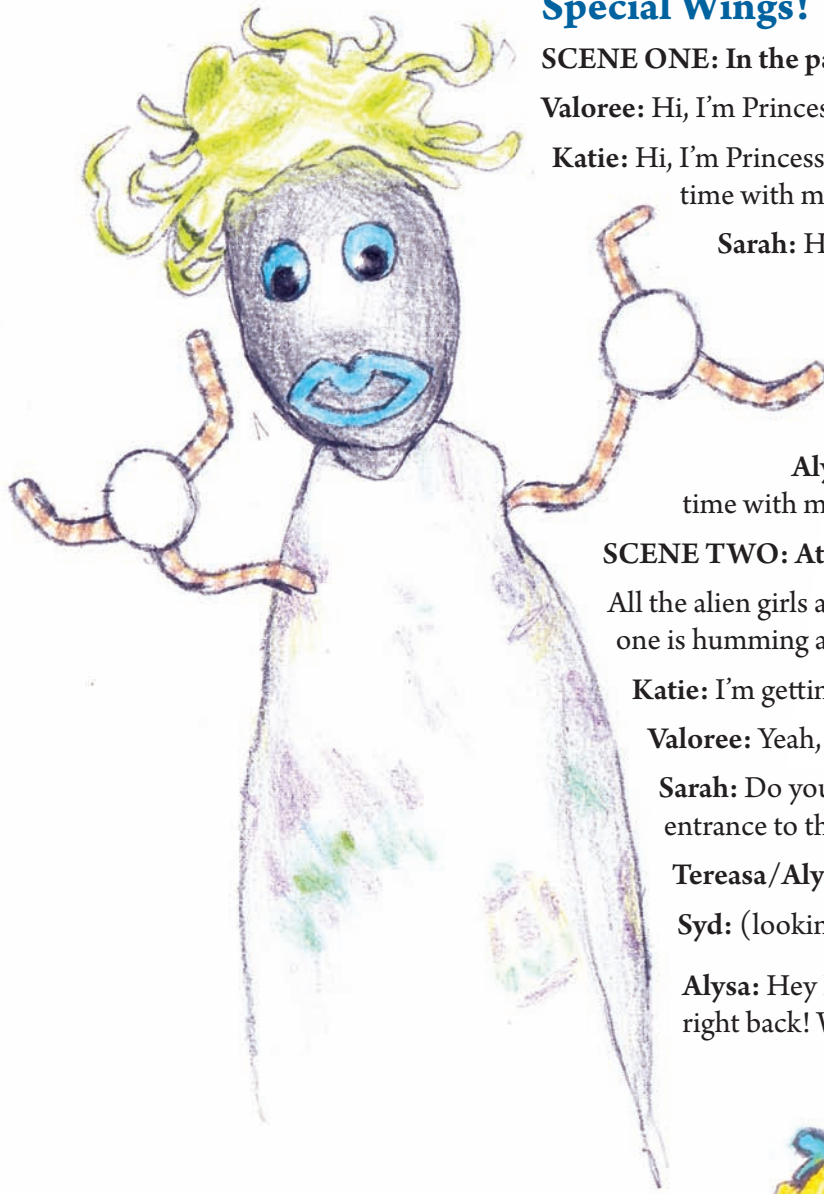
**Valoree:** Yeah, me too!

**Sarah:** Do you guys want to fly over to that new restaurant at the entrance to the park and grab a bite to eat?

**Tereasa/Alysa:** YEAH! YEAH!

**Syd:** (looking sad, she says nothing)

**Alysa:** Hey Princess Cenndeya, we'll be right back! Wait for us right here.



*All the aliens except Princess Cenndeya fly off*

**Syd:** I wish I had wings so that I could fly around with all my friends!

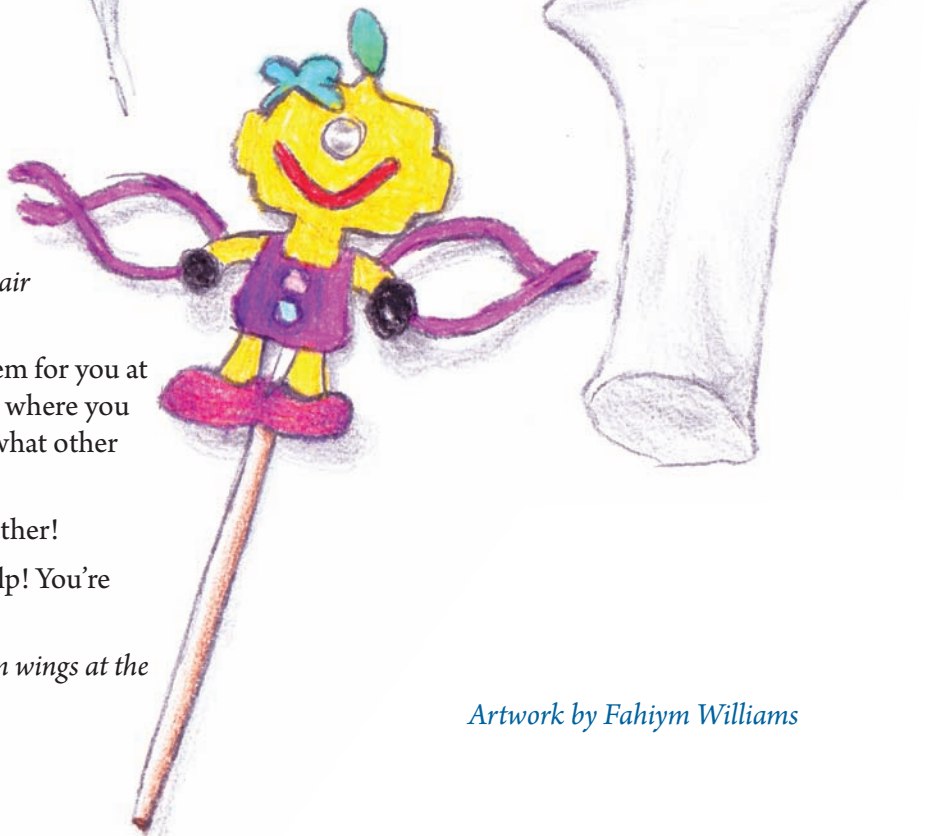
*A few minutes later they return with a special pair of wings.*

**Valoree:** Look what we have! We bought them for you at the AT Store. It's a new place on Main Street where you can buy all kinds of things that help you do what other people can do.

**Sarah:** Now we can all fly and get lunch together!

**Syd:** Thank you princesses this will really help! You're great friends to have.

*All the princesses fly away to order some chicken wings at the new restaurant.*



*Artwork by Fahiyim Williams*

## Celebrating Fahiyim Williams' Contribution to *Connect-Ability*

Special educator Debbie Rembo and her student Fahiyim Williams best illustrate how inclusion of people with or without disabilities benefits everyone. She met him when he was one of her sixth-grade science students. The first thing she noticed about him was his amazing artistic ability. They began to work together on art projects after school in the Uniondale Nassau County school district.

Last June, Fahiyim Williams, a student with autism, became a high-school graduate after participating in all-inclusion classes, thanks to his own hard work and the help of Mrs. Rembo and many of his other teachers along the way. He is *Connect-Ability's* first art editor holding the position since seventh-grade.



When Mrs. Rembo first met Fahiyim, his communication skills were limited. She recognized that he could use his artistic talent to communicate with his peers. She predicted that “once Fahiyim gained notoriety with his talent, his peers would be very interested in him and his artwork.” In 2004 as Mrs. Rembo was reading the disability awareness newsletter, *Connect-Ability*, she saw that the newsletter was in need of an artist. She called *Connect-Ability* staff, and Fahiyim became the newsletter's art editor.

Some of Fahiyim's many illustrations for *Connect-Ability* over his years are reprinted in this issue. His work has also been shown and sold in a Westhampton art gallery. Every year he designs t-shirts for the annual fundraisers of the Developmental Disability Institute in Suffolk County. His drawing of Bill Russell appeared in *Sports Illustrated Kids*.



Fahiyim remained friends and worked on his art with Mrs. Rembo's guidance from sixth-grade to graduation. She told us that “he was accepted by his peers in all his classes and at times was the go-to person to have something drawn. Everybody knew him as the guy who could draw.” With his teacher's help, he used his ability to connect to his classmates.

“Drawing came naturally to Fahiyim,” according to Mrs. Rembo. “Later on he took art classes in the summer time or after school. His last two years of high school he took classes at BOCES and at the Syosset Creative Art Center returning to school in the afternoon to complete his academic work.”

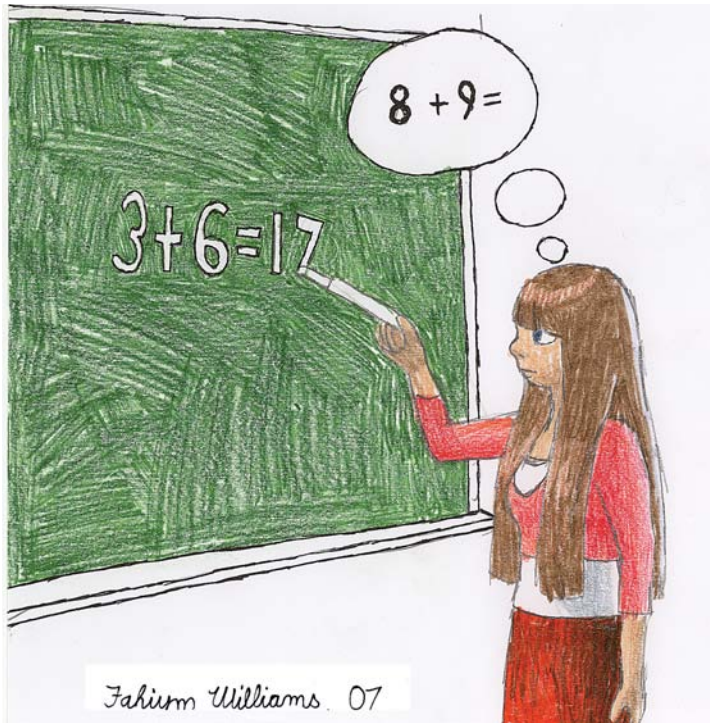
Fahiyim and his teacher kept in close contact with other



*Continued on page 13*

## Celebrating Fahiyam Williams continued

members of *Connect-Ability's* editorial board over the years. Once *Connect-Ability* student writers finished with their articles, Mrs. Rembo read them to Fahiyam, and they decided how best to illustrate them. His first job was to design the *Connect-Ability* logo of people holding hands which will continue to be used. His illustrations have greatly improved the appearance of the newsletter and made it much more engaging to high school readers.



“We have enriched each other’s lives,” Mrs. Rembo concluded. Together they tell a powerful story of what can be accomplished when students with disabilities have the personal commitment, dedication and knowledge that a teacher like Mrs. Rembo brings to her work. Fahiyam has played an important role with the *Connect-Ability* editorial board students who always anxiously waited to see how their articles would be transformed by his talented hand. Thanks to the support and encouragement of his teacher, Fahiyam began this fall to study art at Nassau Community College. We wish him well as he continues to share his art with others.

## Connect-Ability Editorial Board Members march to their own drums!

Drum circles are groups of people playing hand-drums and percussion in a circle. They are distinct from a drumming group or troupe in that the drum circle is an end in itself rather than preparation for a performance. They can range in size from a handful of players to circles with thousands of participants.

The drum circle’s main objective is to share rhythm and get in tune with yourself and with each other. Participants develop a new voice, a collective voice, as the group drums together. The music is entirely improvised. Practically anything that can be banged on to make noise can be used as a percussion instrument such as cans, buckets or pipes. Participants make up the music as they go along.

What a perfect way to learn more about inclusion! What a

motivator for talking and writing about disability. *Connect-Ability* students drummed for a day and a half. Some of their discussions and thoughts are summarized on the next page.



Katie, Harry, Isabel and Alysa

## Drumming and Disability:

### A look at inclusion, removing barriers and communicating with one another

Following our day of drumming, we asked ourselves some questions about drumming and disability. The discussion was lively. Everyone was inspired to say something about sitting in front of a big plastic bucket with our hands in gloves to protect us from our bucket's rough edges. This experience had changed each of us in different ways. Some of our responses are listed below. The editorial board hopes you will want to drum a little yourselves after you read how we felt.

#### 1. Did you enjoy drumming?

- I enjoyed it because you do your own individual rhythm, but it comes together to sound as one
- I found it very relaxing and meditative
- A way to further open my mind
- Easy to do
- It allowed imagination to roam free
- I felt like I was always included and there were no mistakes



*The beat goes on*

#### 2. Is drumming good for everyone?

- Stress reliever, no mistakes
- Style it anyway you want
- No formal training needed
- Everyone knows how to drum and everyone is included
- Very easy to pick up
- Allows you to connect with others
- Gets you moving
- Good group activity that can be socially beneficial
- You can express yourself while being with others

#### 3. What's unique about drumming?

- No talking

- Do what you want
- No one is the boss
- Brings together different styles to make grand music
- No rules
- Improvisation with order
- Different form of communication
- Not communicating by words, communicating by music

#### 4. Pick a person with a disability and describe how you would introduce drumming to them

- Tell her, "don't think, just feel and play"
- Let them experiment
- Pick an easy rhythm and ask them to expand on it
- Give them a drum and start playing myself, allow them to join—it's natural
- Tell him to "Just simply beat on it"
- Ask them to "Do whatever their heart desires"
- Tell them "they're no mistakes"

#### 5. How is drumming a form of inclusion?

- Everyone can participate
- Everyone pitches in to make a beautiful sound
- Allows everyone to express themselves differently while still sounding like one person
- Anybody can be involved
- Every individual plays her own part, in order to sound as one
- No limits



*Drumming circle*

## Guru David Grapka continued

of the terms used in the federal law that requires AT to be considered as Individualized Education Plans (IEP's) are developed for students with disabilities. Assistive technology is "any item, piece of equipment or product system, whether acquired commercially or off the shelf, modified or customized, that is used to increase, maintain or improve the functional capabilities of children with disabilities." P.L. 101-476, IDEA and 34 CFR 300.6; and 200.1 (f) of the regulations of the Commissioner of Education.

David believes that the rich diversity of assistive devices already out there has changed the meaning of disability. Sensory enhancers, keyboard adaptations, environmental controls and computer and educational software have enhanced the lives of students with disability and increased their options to be in regular education classrooms. AT has the potential to promote equity and allow students with disability greater independence and self-reliance. A goal of the *Connect-Ability* editorial board is to increase the inclusion of students with disabilities in all aspects of life. Following David's presentation, the board members formed small discussion groups to talk about how to share the information they had learned about AT with elementary students as part of their ongoing effort to build a toolkit for teachers to use in their classrooms.



## Helping Others Speak Up

### Valoree Lisi

I am part of a program created by the Down Syndrome Association of the Hudson Valley (DSAHV) designed to help parents get appropriate educational services for their kids. My role is to help support students in communicating with their teachers and school staff. Better understanding on both sides is key



to a successful school experience. Teachers and students must learn from one another and respect one another.

I have been lucky to have a mother who has supported and trained me in the special education process. I used the skills she taught me to advocate for myself throughout my school years, and now I have the chance to pass what I learned on to younger students. I attend and speak out in IEP meetings and I help teachers listen to and understand students with Down Syndrome. My strength is in organizing the materials needed by every student to be a better communicator. I use a graphic organizer to prepare myself for any meeting or presentation. I have taught others how to do the same.

Two organizations that have helped me are the "Please Don't Change Me" project and "Gifts From The Hearts For Downs." Music allows us freedom of expression and that makes us better communicators. Even if people don't always understand us, they can understand our music.

One of the most important skills I have is the ability to advocate for myself and speak up. I think about all the things I can do, not the things I can't do. People with disabilities can reach their goals, but the first thing they need to learn to do is speak up. I help others with that.

**THANK YOU TO NYSUT,  
OUR SPONSOR.**

*Your support allows us to continue  
this newsletter and thereby promote  
awareness and understanding among the  
young people of New York.*

**nysut**  
A Union of Professionals

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## Acceptance

*Tolerance is one thing, acceptance is another.*

*We can all tolerate the boy who sits alone in class.*

*But can we accept him for the kind and gentle heart he really has?*

*We can all tolerate the girl who is a little different from us.*

*But can we accept her for the fun-loving artistic person she really is?*

*We can all tolerate the girl who is in the chair.*

*But can we accept her for her ability to solve problems and the determined look in her eyes?*

*There is always something more than what's just on the surface.*

*You can tolerate or you can accept.*

*The choice is always yours.*

**Sarah Kaledin**

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## Looking for a Place of Peace

*Could you imagine  
a world of hurt,  
a world of loneliness?*

*Sad child  
awoke by herself  
and grew up by herself*

*No other could have  
cried as much as she  
but she dreams,*

*she dreams  
of one day  
finding a place of peace  
and harmony and love*

*where she will never cry again.*

**Olivia Gorham**

## We Are Who We Are

*I am Collette Anne McLean*

*I am outgoing and funny*

*I have a hard time staying on task.*

*I live a normal teenage life.*

*I'm a cheerleader and volleyball player.*

*I'm always pushing myself to be the best I can be.*

*I am lucky to have family, friends, and teachers in my life.*

*I am unique in every way.*

*Who I am is who I love.*

*I have ADHD.*

*I am still trying to learn what this is.*

*I ask why, when does this happen?*

*But I think I know.*

*God made me special from head to tippy toe.*

*Nothing is going to change that.*

*I am who I am.*

*I learn everyday*

*I can do anything ten times better that I thought.*

*I try and try and try again*

*until I get it.*

**Collette Anne McLean**

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## Providing Hope

*Wheelchair sits there waiting*

*Crutches balance my walking*

*Wishing for the feeling of running*

*With the wind blowing through my hair*

*Technology is forever evolving*

*Improving systems malfunctioning*

*Restoring vision, movement, sensation*

*Providing hope to all who are wishing.*

**Theresa Colose**

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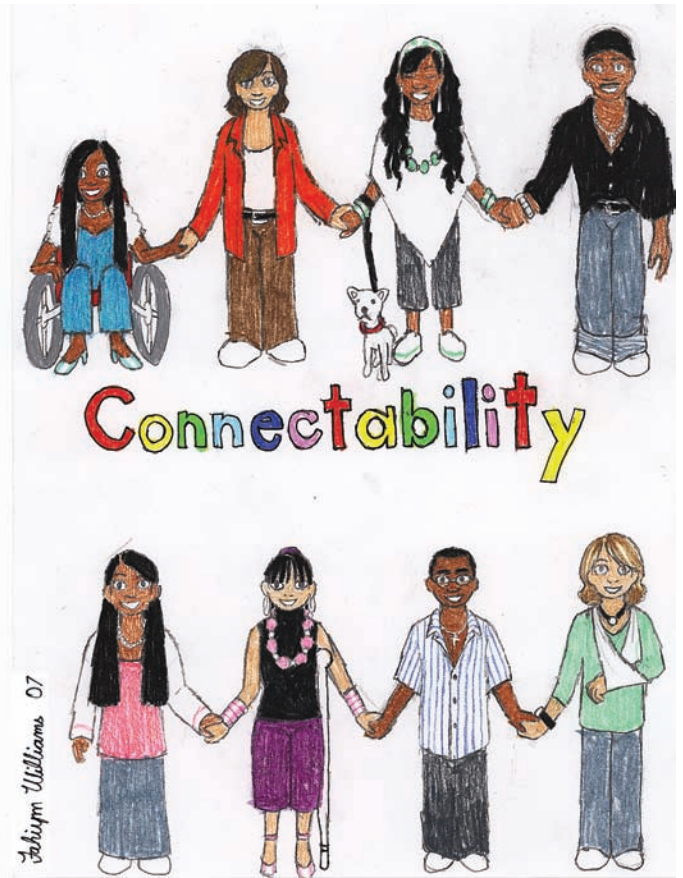
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## WE NEED YOUR HELP

To All Students:

I write you from the *Connect-Ability* summer workshop I'm attending at the New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) Headquarters in Latham, NY. My reason for writing is to convince you to contribute to our annual newsletter. We are working hard to make inclusion of students with disabilities in every aspect of school and community life a reality. We would like to hear from you. *Connect-Ability* is a coalition of high school students of New York state who come together to foster disabilities awareness in our school and communities. Whether the topic is individualized education plans, assistive tech-



nology, personal experience or the experience of a friend or relative, there's always good information and stories to share. So come be a part of this service to the community. Learn something yourself and practice your writing skills.

If you decide to write or draw something, we will be happy to review it at the next editorial board meeting and get back to you with our ideas. Now's the time to contribute by sending us a story or article that delves into the way a disability has affected your life or others. You can email us at [cmchugh@nysutmail.org](mailto:cmchugh@nysutmail.org) or call us at 800-342-9810, x6522 and talk with Catharine McHugh or Terry McSweeney, our advisors.

Think about it. I am eager to hear from you.

With sincerity,  
Shane

[www.nysut.org/connect](http://www.nysut.org/connect)