

Connect-Ability

A newsletter on disabilities awareness prepared by and for students.

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A message from Maria Neira, NYSUT vice president

New York State United Teachers leaders read last year in the Albany Times Union about the expected demise of the Disabilities Awareness newsletter. They pledged the union's support to keep the publication going. NYSUT Vice President Maria Neira, who oversees the union's research department encompassing educational issues and special education, explains the union's commitment:



Maria Neira

NYSUT is proud to sponsor this project. First, it brings together students with and without disabilities for hands-on opportunities to write, edit and design a remarkable newsletter. Secondly, the end product reaches thousands of students, parents and educators to promote awareness of disabilities from a student's point of view.

More than a dozen high school students from across the state, with and without disabilities, spent three days at the union's Latham headquarters to research, write and edit the 2007 version of the *Disability Awareness Newsletter*, which they have renamed *Connect-Ability*. They worked with NYSUT staff and other volunteers to produce the publication. About 30,000 copies of the newsletter have been distributed annually to schools throughout New York state.

NYSUT, with more than 585,000 members statewide, will work with the student editors to help broaden the newsletter's circulation. Through our partnership, we can make it possible for students to increase distribution across the state and through our Web site, www.nysut.org. The union also is underwriting student travel and workshop expenses, and contributing in-kind printing services for the publication.

We are proud to be able to help in the efforts to increase awareness and enhance greater understanding among students with and without disabilities. Giving students a "voice" is what this project is all about.



Editorial: Educating young people is key

Rory Harte
Guilderland High School
Guilderland

Youth is something to hide behind. Hiding behind all that is expected of you in your coming years. But there comes a time when you must address your own responsibilities, defend your own opinions and stand for the knowledge you have obtained throughout your youth.

I have experienced in high school what I could never reach out and grasp again. Some of the knowledge I have gained will forever last within my mind. Advocacy for people with disabilities took on a form of its own within my own education. Being a member of the editorial board for six years presented me with valuable opportunities and experiences. In first joining the newsletter I immediately noticed the obvious differences within the group. These differences created fear and misunderstanding within my own mind. What was I to do with a group of people so obviously different from myself? But what I didn't know then and what I was about to learn was that these differences were just obstacles; obstacles in the course of understanding. As our meetings progressed I came to know each person and began to break down the misunderstandings I once had formed. This specific act of breaking down my previous judgments is in essence the point of disability

Taking the time to listen

Andrew Waite
Boston University
Boston

Colin is difficult to understand. He has never been officially diagnosed, but his symptoms match a severe form of Autism. When he speaks, he mumbles through sentences but lacks the mastery over his mouth to control his diction. While he has always had some trouble getting his message across, the 22-year-old Syracuse University student has abandoned his ability to enunciate. It seems, as time has passed, Colin has simply gotten lazy with his communication.

But haven't we all? Text and instant messaging have become dominant over actual conversation. Internet lingo is the new language, slang the new speech. In a world where lackadaisical is confused for late-breaking, it's no wonder we are all struggling to understand each other.

That's why I admire these kids who gave up some of their precious summer liberty to get their message out there. They took the time to communicate. And time is what it takes to communicate correctly.

For the students with disabilities who contributed to this newsletter, their task can be all the more trying. I think about Colin: physically unable to speak perfectly and therefore not always perceived the way he would like to be. When anyone fails to converse properly, they run the

awareness. The newsletter taught me this.

Educating young people is key in order to break down prejudices and misunderstandings early in peoples' lives. Developing an awareness of disability gives us the chance to explore new people and experiences. We can share what we've learned with others. Without educating the public about disabilities early, stereotypes and discrimination set in.

A year ago as we concluded our tenth issue of the newsletter, the editorial board hit some rough and difficult times. We said good-bye to one another when our sponsors decided that continuing the newsletter was not one of their priorities. Uncertain of our future, we continued to hope that new funding would bring us better luck. Fortunately enough, New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) expressed interest in picking up the newsletter. With the smooth production of this issue of our first NYSUT disability awareness newsletter I know that we have forged a healthy and growing friendship with our new sponsor, and I look forward to what the new school year will bring.

A new beginning calls for a new name and at its August meeting the editorial board chose *Connect-Ability* because that is what this project is all about. For me, on a personal level, connecting with kids with disabilities has taught me important lessons. Let me know what you think by emailing me at rharte777@gmail.com.

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risk of being misinterpreted. After all, the transcript of two Harvard students' online conversation might read like a prison dialogue to a baby boomer.

What links Colin with the IM-speaking Harvard students is their lack of effort. Colin knows he can speak more crisply and does so when he wants to ensure everyone will join him for a game of UNO. The Harvard students adjust their language every time a term paper is due. Everyone has some tools for proper talk. Whether it's the written word, a signed language or verbal vernacular, communication binds us all. Why do we waste it with our need for speed?

This editorial board has taken their time to craft and compose. The least we all can do is take the time to listen.

A student with a disability goes to college

Anonymous

For any student entering the first year of college, adjustment is a common theme and one not to be taken lightly, as particular habits could make the difference between soaring high or crashing into a thorn bush. In my situation the task required me to be particularly meticulous because the adjustment wasn't just about a transition from one educational facility to another but from a special education to a mainstream environment. The adjustment required me to do something entirely risky but necessary, disclosing my disability without drawing attention to myself.

Having a learning disability known as speech and language processing delay, I was able to obtain the necessary accommodations that would enable me to learn to the best of my ability. For any student with a learning disability, it is imperative that the accommodations eliminate any "outside factors" that could interfere with the ability to learn and perform optimally. My accommodations included extra time on tests and a note taker. I needed a note taker because in classes where the professor spoke quickly it wouldn't have been the same learning experience for me as it was for the other students. I wouldn't have been able

If there was anything that I learned at my high school it was to have and show no shame in having a learning disability because by hiding it I would truly suffer.

to hang on to the eloquence of the professor's rhetoric while simultaneously attacking my notebook. The extra time on tests was an even more important factor. Going into every exam, I wanted to have the comfort of knowing that I only had to worry about studying the material thoroughly and that I would be measured by my devotion to the subject at hand. I introduced myself to each professor at the beginning of each class because they needed to know that I needed these accommodations and if given them would show my appreciation by displaying my full potential. If there was anything that I learned at my high school it was to have and show no shame in having a learning disability because by hiding it I would truly suffer. Nonetheless, when it came to my peers I was evasive.

With good reason I did not want to tell them. I did not want to draw unnecessary attention to myself. Like any other human being I desired to be respected for my intelligence. Instead of being on the receiving end, my goal was to be the one handing out advice, especially in the social sciences, where my abilities shined. In this regard I

Advice for high school students with disabilities who are beginning the college search

1. Explore the Office of Disability Services Web site for each college you are considering.
2. Familiarize yourself with the types of services and accommodations the college offers.
3. Know the accommodations that would be most beneficial for you.
4. Schedule a meeting at the Office of Disability Services as part of your college visit.
5. Be aware that self advocacy is imperative in college — high schools often provide services to students with disabilities automatically. It is necessary to request these services in college.
6. Know your rights — the Americans With Disabilities Act guarantees accommodations for individuals with documented disabilities.
7. Be your own advocate.

*Provided by Lucille C Lamey, Ph.D.
Disability Support Specialist
Bard College
Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y.*

received the best of both worlds. I received all the help I needed from my professors but was able to be respected among my peers for my knowledge.

I challenged myself further by actively pursuing a leadership role in my class. Without telling my folks at home, I signed up as a candidate for vice president of the freshman class and immediately began compiling fliers. Instead of writing the predictable "Vote for Me," I simply enlarged my unique Italian name and used my creativity to do the rest. One of my fliers consisted of the Ferrari Mascot with a slogan that read "the Italian Stallion." Another featured a picture of a famous Italian model. It was a lot of work but I made sure that these fliers were completed the first night of the campaigning process. By the next morning people were talking about my candidacy and my opponents were still getting signatures to run for office. One week later I had captured the vice presidential nomination for my class and I was really excited to spread the good news to everyone I knew because it was an objective that I pursued entirely on my own. While my mainstream peers were pondering the prospects of getting adjusted and "smelling the coffee," I drank all the coffee. I grabbed that coffee mug, gulped down every single drop and then lay content, filled with the taste of victory. Transition to college has its easy side.

Advocate globally for people with disabilities

Rory Harte
Guilderland High School
Guilderland

Newsletter editorial board members listened recently to Clarence J. Sundram, president of Mental Disabilities International, and former chair of the NYS Commission on Quality of Care for the Mentally Disabled. Sundram spoke to the board on the need to raise awareness and advocate on behalf of persons with disabilities worldwide.

These things will not change quickly.

— Clarence J. Sundram

Horror. This would be the right word to describe what I was shown last night. What I have seen are the “things” Clarence J. Sundram is talking about. They are the complete neglect and inhumane treatment of people with disabilities. Sitting in my own comfortable chair in a perfectly air conditioned room, I was shown image after image. Each held a different meaning and each had its own significant horror. As if my eyes were not seeing reality, I watched the young and the old completely neglected in places my mind could never have conjured.

The pain and neglect that I saw in those photos was the direct result of ignorance and misunderstanding. People fear what they do not understand. Thus differences foster and turn slowly but surely into exclusion. Awareness and knowledge are keys in the attempt to end misunderstanding and ignorance. Awareness must reach out to the young in order to change future generations. For young minds are dynamic, while others may be stiff and stagnant. Youthful generations must be aware of their surroundings and change. Only by engaging youth, can we secure universal human rights.

It was really all a series of accidents.

— Sundram

Sundram didn't think his life would end up like this. He never thought that he would spend his career fighting the rights of people with disabilities. He began as a young lawyer who took an almost immediate interest in working with people in correctional facilities, not people in mental institutions. While still in his twenties, he found work in the governor's office in Albany and had the job of responding to many inquiries about how people with disabilities were being treated in state run institutions. He began working on legislation that would create an organization under the executive branch of government to oversee the care of these persons and respond to the concerns of their family members. What came of his desire to help improve conditions for persons with disabilities was the creation in 1978 of a new state agency called the New York State Commission on Quality of Care (CQC). CQC was an organization that focused on improving the quality of life for New Yorkers with disabilities. It served as an oversight agency to the Offices of Mental Retardation and



Clarence J. Sundram, third from left, with members of the editorial board.

Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) and Mental Health (OMH). This was a formidable task and it was no accident that Sundram was named its first Chairman. He served there for twenty years.

Taking awareness to a broader audience, he began less than a decade ago to help other nations reform mental health services. His international work was based on a desire to teach those in other countries to avoid the mistakes the United States had made in dealing with people with disabilities. Visiting institutions in mostly third world countries, Sundram began photographing, videotaping and speaking with patients and employees at a variety of institutions. He found that countries such as Armenia, Turkey, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Indonesia and Romania have a long way to go to improve the conditions for their citizens with disabilities. Sundram continues to visit and hear the stories of people with disabilities in these countries. He continues his fight for universal human rights and disability awareness.

You must have a complete cultural shift.

— Sundram

Sundram has used different ways to address awareness in the various countries he visited. He is often surprised to see how easy it is to walk into institutions in other countries, talk to the staff and residents and ask questions about their experiences. But unlike New York State, other governments do not enjoy our wealth nor are they protected by laws similar to ours. Finding the resources to meet the needs of people with disabilities is a big challenge. Sundram has encountered obstacles to good quality care such as different family values and cultural practices and inadequate clinical assessments. Many people with disabilities are treated as outsiders within their own countries. Little value is placed on their lives and they have no access to lawyers or other advocates. Once inside institutions they are forced into lives of complete and utter misery. Their liberties are withheld from them for one simple reason, fear. Yet there is one simple answer, awareness.

Sundram has worked hard to call attention to the conditions that plague so many persons with disabilities around the world. The United Nations has responded with its recent conference proclaiming the rights of individuals with disabilities. Eighty countries have recognized these rights. Unfortunately, many have not, including our own. Sundram's work continues.

Traumatic brain injury is a complex issue

Cassie Ford

Bethlehem Central High School

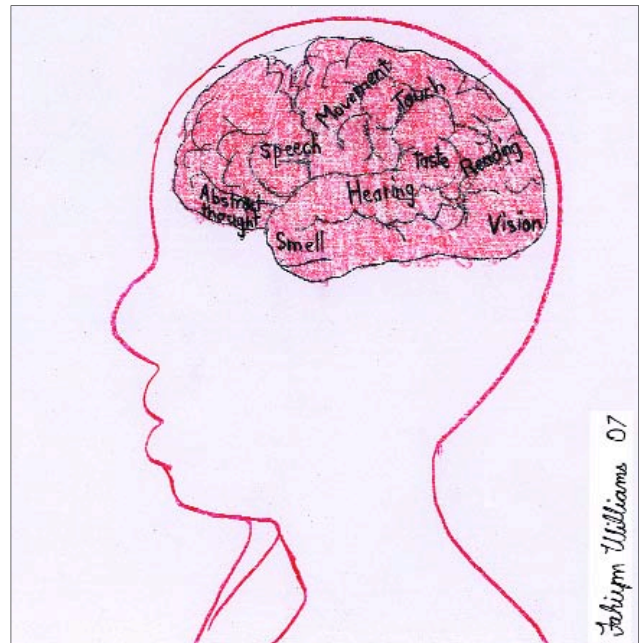
Delmar

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) occurs when there is physical damage to the brain. Thirty-seven thousand children between the ages of 0-14 are hospitalized annually in this country because of TBI. Over 400,000 kids visit emergency rooms with head injuries. TBI can be caused by many different accidents. Two examples that every teenager needs to remember are a passenger who hits his head on the dashboard during a car crash or a high school football player colliding on the field with an opponent. Other causes include gunshot wounds and child abuse. Males are more likely to suffer TBI and kids ages 0-4 and 15-19 are at the highest risk.

Damage occurs when the brain violently moves back and forth against the inside of the skull. The frontal and temporal lobes of the brain, the major speech and language areas often receive the most damage. As a result, communication difficulties frequently follow severe head injuries. Other problems that are caused by TBI may include trouble with swallowing, walking, balance and coordination. Even changes in the ability to smell and in memory and cognitive or thinking skills can occur.

Cognitive and communication problems that result from the TBI vary from person to person. The severity of problems depends on many factors, which include an individual's personality, age, and the level and location of the brain damage.

Students with TBI who return to school after their accidents face many challenges because their injuries affect many of the skill areas and functions that school work demands — paying attention, communicating effectively, remaining alert, moving from class to class and remembering to do homework. These students need support from their teachers and their classmates. Individualized Education Plans or 504 Plans can be written by school staff and parents to outline what kinds of special education programs students need. Many times, services like



occupational and physical therapy, speech and language services, and counseling can assist students in achieving success in school.

Some effects from traumatic brain injury may be only temporary. This temporary damage is due to contusions, the swelling and bruising of the brain. The functions of those areas of the brain can return once the swelling or bruising goes away. This makes it difficult to predict accurately the extent of long-term effects of TBI immediately after the head injury occurs.

TBI is a complex health issue that requires our understanding. It can be treated with specialized therapies and support. Classmates who are friendly, non-judgmental and helpful to students with TBI will speed their transition back to school.

www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/tbi

www.cdc.gov/ncipc/tbi

Two I's talk about their IEP's

Students who learn differently from other students may require an individualized education program or IEP. An IEP is developed each year by parents, students and school staff. It is a written agreement that school staff will provide extra help, support, services or programs for each student who qualifies for special education. The letter "I" in the IEP is the important word. Education is about the individual and the program tells parents, students and teachers what the student needs to benefit from an education.

When students become teenagers they begin to play a bigger role in planning their own education. Like other teens, it's important for them to learn how to communicate effectively with others to make sure they are getting the support they need to succeed in school and move on into

the adult world. This takes practice. Preparing for and participating in an IEP meeting should begin as early as possible for each individual student. Students can watch how their parents do it and they can talk to their teachers about it. They can ask questions and read how other students have taken part in their own IEP meetings. During high school all students begin to discover what they want to do when school ends. The IEP process helps support students with learning differences in planning for life after school.

It takes time to feel comfortable talking to others about your learning differences. An important part of growing up is being able to identify what you need to achieve your goals. All students struggle with this process. Participating

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Side by Side

A sibling opens up a different world.

Alexis Kim
Niskayuna High School
Niskayuna

Growing up with a brother with a learning disability has opened my eyes to a whole different world. Although my brother and I have attended all the same schools, there has always been a distinct difference in our educations. I attend the mainstream classes, while my brother has always had to go to the special education rooms. It amazes me how, even though we have the same educational requirements, we both received very different treatment. I would always complain about how unfair it was when my brother would receive extra time for a test or have extended time for homework when in reality, it is unfair my brother has a learning disability.

In 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) was reauthorized as a federal law to ensure that public schools would be required to meet the needs of people with disabilities. This law protects students between the ages of three and 21 and guarantees them a free, appropriate, public education. The goal of IDEIA is to enhance the quality of life of children and young adults with disabilities and ensure them an education that meets their unique needs. It lays out a process

for parents to work with their school district to develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for the student with a disability. An IEP is a specialized plan for the student's school year. It helps teachers to identify the exact needs of the student and plans for how those needs can be met so that the student can graduate from high school or reach specific educational goals. My brother's IEP made his transition into college a lot easier on him and my family. By carefully implementing the accommodations and providing the support services my brother required to learn effectively, he was able to achieve his goal of continuing his education.

How do parents learn how to participate in writing an IEP for their child with a disability? For one thing, school districts can share information with parents and help them prepare to participate in the process. At the conclusion of the annual IEP meeting my family received a copy of my brother's IEP along with something called a "Procedural Safeguard Notice." The Notice is really a large packet of materials listing all the rights a child with a disability has. By becoming familiar with these rights my family could better advocate for my brother to receive the education that he needed.

The knowledge I've gained being raised side by side with my brother has allowed me to glimpse the struggles a disabled student has. Although my brother had many rough experiences throughout his time in high school, it was comforting to know that special education law always protected him and that my parents were working with school district staff to ensure his success.

Doing okay with Attention Deficit Disorder

Robbie McNary
Bethlehem Central High School
Delmar

My name is Jack and I have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). My morning starts off with the slow and steady buzz of my alarm clock. I pop out of bed, do my morning chores and get ready for school. The last thing on the agenda before I head out is to take my daily dosage of Aderol. It is a drug prescribed to help me through my day.

The bus ride to school is a silent one, because most people are still waking up. I like the silence because it gives me a chance to prepare myself for what the day is going to bring. Going to high school every morning is like walking into a dark closet. All I can do is walk in with confidence, hope I don't trip and pray I can make it through the day.

Life as a high school student is tough. Life as a high school student with ADHD is even tougher. Living with ADHD means that I am going to spend most of my day concentrating on trying to focus. It seems like an endless cycle and I live for that time of day when I am able to break out of it. At times it's like having a radio station finally come in after endless amounts of fuzz.

When it comes to my classes, it's tough for me to focus

for the full 45 minutes. My mind tends to wander from the task at hand to little things around the room, plans I might have or anything else that might come to mind. My notes normally start off well written and detailed. I'm a good student. But as the class goes on, my notes tend to turn into one or two words, very brief and not very relevant. By the end of the class I am praying for it to be over and at this point my notes look more like doodles than anything else. My teachers are pretty understanding about my situation. They try not to get too frustrated with me, knowing my disability. But if they notice me getting off task they quickly try to re-focus me before I get totally lost and behind the group. Some teachers have worked out a special sign or code to use if they notice me wandering. One of them puts his hand on his hip (something he never does otherwise) and I know it's my sign to re-focus. In this way, not everyone in the classroom is aware that I need these reminders. Just he and I know it. That's nice.

Class is not the only place I struggle to keep focus. When I get home it is sometimes tough for me to get all my assignments done. I tend to procrastinate a lot. I get bored easily and end up putting it off until the end of the night or even to the next day. In the past, these poor work habits have caused my grades to decline because I am not able to finish some of the assignments I am given. When I am home I don't have a teacher looking over my shoulder,

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What's wrong? Depression, that's what!

Mitchell H. Goliber
Schenectady High School
Schenectady

Ever feel like you never should have gotten out of bed this morning? Your best-loved interests no longer hit the spot?

Every now and then, we all have bad days, but when that stress or whatever is making you upset gets overwhelming, you may be headed for depression.

A person who has depression may lose joy or interest in things he/she really likes. It can affect people of all ages. There's always the possibility that anyone may get depressed. It can have many different causes, including childhood trauma, stress and a pessimistic personality.

Although teenagers having depression is rare, they still have to cope with stress. Stress can have many different effects on an individual. Too much stress and someone could end up having depression. Some teens turn to drugs and alcohol in order to cope with or cover up their depression.

Some symptoms of depression include constant sadness, irritability, tension, energy loss, appetite changes, changes in sleeping patterns, restlessness, decrease in ability to make decisions, feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, guilt and thoughts of suicide and death.

Stress can have many different effects on an individual.

Some individuals with major depression may attempt to commit suicide. Parents who hear their children talk about suicide should take the threat seriously and seek psychiatric help and attention A.S.A.P.

When a teenager has been diagnosed with depression, there's help out there including psychiatrists, counselors and medication. For more information about depression, please visit www.depression.com. Just remember, it's not the end of the world.

In the Drawer

Austin Crittenden
Red Hook High School
Red Hook

I stared at the drawer, knowing what was inside. I knew what it could do to me. That thought scared me more than you could imagine. I just sat on the bed and stared, thinking and pondering about everything. Sweat beads poured down the side of my face like rain drenching the ground below it. I thought about everything that I had ever done, everyone I had ever known, everything. I thought about the first time I rode a bike. My father actually spent time with me then. I was five and we would ride bikes and play catch all the time. I thought about my mom and how she was always there for me, but never really cared. She just puts on that fake smile whenever I am around. My younger brother used to want to be just like me. Now we don't even talk.

My friends have always been good to me. However, I feel like I don't fit in with them anymore. I feel like they're always excluding me, but I know they're not. I don't even go out with them anymore because I know I won't have a good time. Then I thought about Laura, the only girl I

ever liked. When I was in seventh grade I asked her out and she laughed in my face. Girls don't even consider me a potential date. When they see me they just think, "Why is he so weird?"

I never thought I was weird. It's not like I hung out with the Goths, and I'm certainly not Emo. I wear regular, laid back clothes. I get pretty good grades in school, always just barely making the honor roll. Teachers seem to like me. I even occasionally crack a few jokes in class. I like mainstream music and Hollywood movies. I was always a bit of an outcast but I did all right socially. My social life was too atrocious. It didn't make me happy. I was miserable. I felt as if no one in the world cared about me.

Still concentrating on the drawer, sweat still rolling down my forehead, I made a decision. I moved my hand towards the knob of the drawer. My hand was trembling more than ever at this moment. I hesitantly contacted the knob with my shaky fingers. I pulled back, rethinking what I was about to do. I thought would it really be worth it? Without another thought I aggressively pulled open the drawer. I took it out and pulled the trigger.

Bang!

I snapped back to reality and placed my little brother's water gun back into the drawer. The moment had passed. It was time for dinner so I ran downstairs. We were having my favorite pizza.



I'm S.A.D.

Spencer couldn't stop thinking about his family.

Shane Crittenden
Linden Avenue Middle School
Red Hook

Background: Spencer wasn't feeling very good. In fact, he was incredibly stressed out and very worried, worried about his family. His grades were dropping because he couldn't concentrate. Usually they were high, so his professors were able to figure that something was wrong. They set up an appointment with the college counselor, Dr. Radisson.

Dr. Radisson: Hello Spencer, I'm sure you know why you are here. Sit down. Your grades are dropping, you're falling asleep in class and you just don't seem the same. Is something wrong?

Spencer: Well, I'm concerned about my family; I can't stop thinking about them.

Dr. Radisson: When you say concerned...?

Spencer: I e-mail them frequently, but they rarely respond because they're so busy. This makes me worry because I know very little about what is going on at home.

Dr. Radisson: If you're comfortable telling me, has this been affecting you in any other way? Other than worrying about them I mean.

Spencer: I have trouble sleeping and when I do sleep, I get nightmares frequently. I'm incredibly worried that they might get hurt or possibly killed. We live in a really bad part of the city so...

Dr. Radisson: You've recently separated from your family and that separation causes everyone some stress. Everything's new here. Try to remember when you first

went to kindergarten — how you felt then?

Spencer: Yes I think I remember but maybe it is just that my mom always tells the story that I hugged her around the legs and wouldn't let go. She laughs about it now but it lasted for a long while. I hated leaving home, leaving my mom.

Dr. Radisson: Do you ever feel sick now, physically sick because you're worried?

Spencer: Yes, I frequently have headaches, stomachaches, and class work is getting more difficult.

Dr. Radisson: I think we can agree that you feel anxious about being separated from your family but do you feel depressed or sad?

Spencer: I would have to say it is mainly stress and anxiety, but I guess you could call it sad. It's sad that someone 18 years old is worried all of the time. Wouldn't you call that sad?

Dr. Radisson: Have you found anything to keep you from thinking about your family?

Spencer: My friends are often good at distracting me from my worries, but sometimes it's not enough to make me forget my family. Sometimes we will go to a movie, talk, hang out. Sometimes we play basketball just for a break. But I never really forget my family.

Dr. Radisson: I am going to recommend you see a psychiatrist, and keep spending time with your friends. It will help a lot.

Spencer: A psychiatrist? Wow, do you think I'm crazy?

Dr. Radisson: You may have a condition we call

Separation Anxiety Disorder. It begins before the age of 18, usually pretty early on. But maybe you have had this condition for some time. A psychiatrist will conduct some tests - mostly interviews, a social and family history. Then there are treatments that he can recommend that will help you manage your symptoms of anxiety. Relaxation techniques, ways to identify the first signs of worry so that you can take action to reduce your anxiety. Other options may be available to you. You're beginning your adult life and you want to do it without having to worry all the time.

Spencer: I'd like to learn how to stop worrying. What's this guy's name?

*“A psychiatrist? Wow,
do you think I'm crazy?”*

Doing okay ...

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helping me to get back on task. I have to rely on myself to keep my mind on the task ahead. I try to do my work in an environment where there are little to no distractions around me. This way I am able to better focus on what I am doing. To me that means a quiet room without anyone in it, no TV, no radio, just a light, a pen and my work.

Living with ADHD can be tough. Constantly trying to concentrate on focusing can be a tiring thing. But with support from my friends, family and teachers I have done my best effort to stay focused, and I think I'm living just about the same type of life as a person without ADHD.

Connect-Ability

- Address your own responsibilities.
- Defend your own opinions.
- Stand for the knowledge you have obtained throughout your youth.
- Use your Ability ... to Connect.

Ramps

Bridget Ford
Emerson College
Boston

"It won't always be like this, you know," my mother said.

I have to give her credit. How she managed to churn that one out with the semblance of conviction, I will never know. Almost perverted, really, to glaze over every pulsating urge to yell, scream, "Life sucks, it really, really, really sucks."

"Yeah," I said.

It was the best I could say in return. My mother had just arrived at the end of her rope, while I, on the other hand, had been there for quite some time. I hoped that I had made her arrival as smooth possible.

"Let's go home," my mother said.

"Yeah," I said.

So we picked ourselves up and moved on. I made a mad dash. My mother meandered, reluctant to abandon the sight of defeat. Still within the perimeters of the parking lot, the pain, the reality was too fresh. To leave would allow it all to sink in.

I slammed my hand into the car door. I needed to go. My patience was slim. But still my mother was taking her sweet time. I took one long, last look at my former high school. The school's emblem stared at me from the front of the building: Truth - Justice - Loyalty.

My mother finally reached the car and so began the process of getting me into it. Most people are excited to

get their own car; it means the suspension of their physical limits. Go where and when you please. My car was the opposite. I was a permanent passenger.

I was put in the van and off I went. Back home, my family could, as the dean so casually said, "accommodate" me. Accommodations had never been lacking before for other students. Students can get into fight after fight, do copious amounts of drugs, get caught in compromising positions and this school could still accommodate them.

But don't ever, don't ever suggest by spending more money, a school could address a student's special needs.

"Are you okay?" my mother asked.

"Yeah," I said.

She's not okay. Not even my mother can stand to drive me home. The drive home is an inescapable reminder of my accident. Oh poor old me to pass by the spot of my crash to be reminded of what? That which I'm constantly conscious of? It's nothing for me. It's hard for her.

"Alright, we're home," my mother announced.

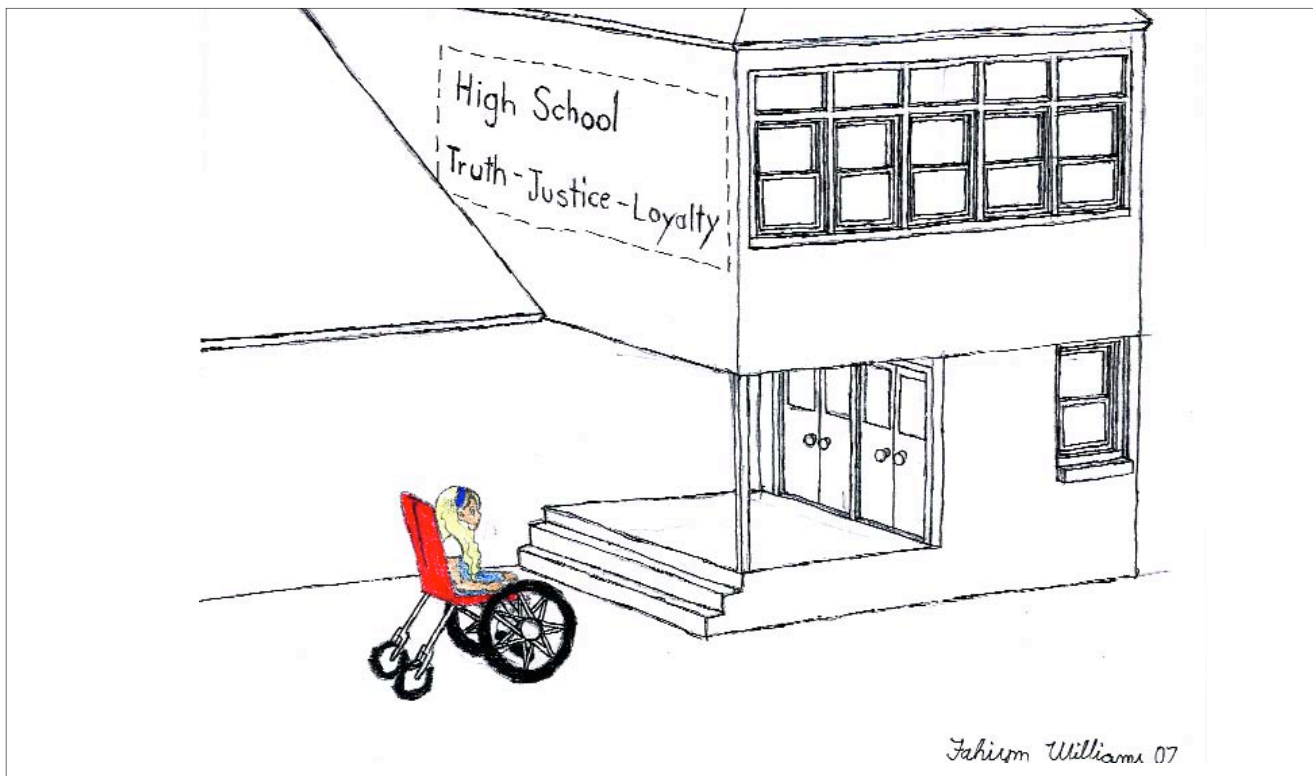
"Yeah," I said.

All that was left was to get me into the house. All of it was a routine by now.

Out of the car, I propelled myself toward the front door and again I waited for my mother to catch up. Something caught my right eye's attention. It was unmistakable. It was a High School uniform coming down my street. Its owner was skipping, jogging, jumping, kicking, stretching each seam to its limit with ease. My front door opened.

"Go in," my mother said.

"Yeah," I said.



Numbers – a conversation

Stephen Schubmehl
Christian Brothers Academy
Albany

Bballer311: Hey John!

TheMan212: Hi Tom!

Bballer311: What's up?

TheMan212: Nothing much. I'm just really bored.

Bballer311: Me too. How about we see a movie today?

TheMan212: Yeah sure. What time do you want to go see the movie?

Bballer311: How about at 8 o'clock?

TheMan212: We can't see a movie at 3. It's already five o'clock.

Bballer311: I didn't say three o'clock, I said eight o'clock.

TheMan212: Oh I'm sorry, sometimes I mix numbers up that look a lot like each other.

Bballer311: Why do you mix them up?

TheMan212: Well it is something I have always done and it is because I have a disability.

Bballer311: I'm sorry. Does it hurt?

TheMan212: Don't say sorry and no it doesn't hurt. What I have is known as dyscalculia.

Bballer311: What exactly is dyscalculia?

TheMan212: Well dyscalculia is a learning disability much like dyslexia except with numbers. People with dyscalculia, like me, have trouble with reading numbers in sequence and sometimes do operations backwards. Also people who have dyscalculia may have trouble with directions and spatial relations.

Bballer311: How come you have this disability?

TheMan212: No one really knows exactly what causes someone to have dyscalculia but people believe the main

cause is a weakness in visual processing, which means that my eyes don't see numbers the way they should be seen.

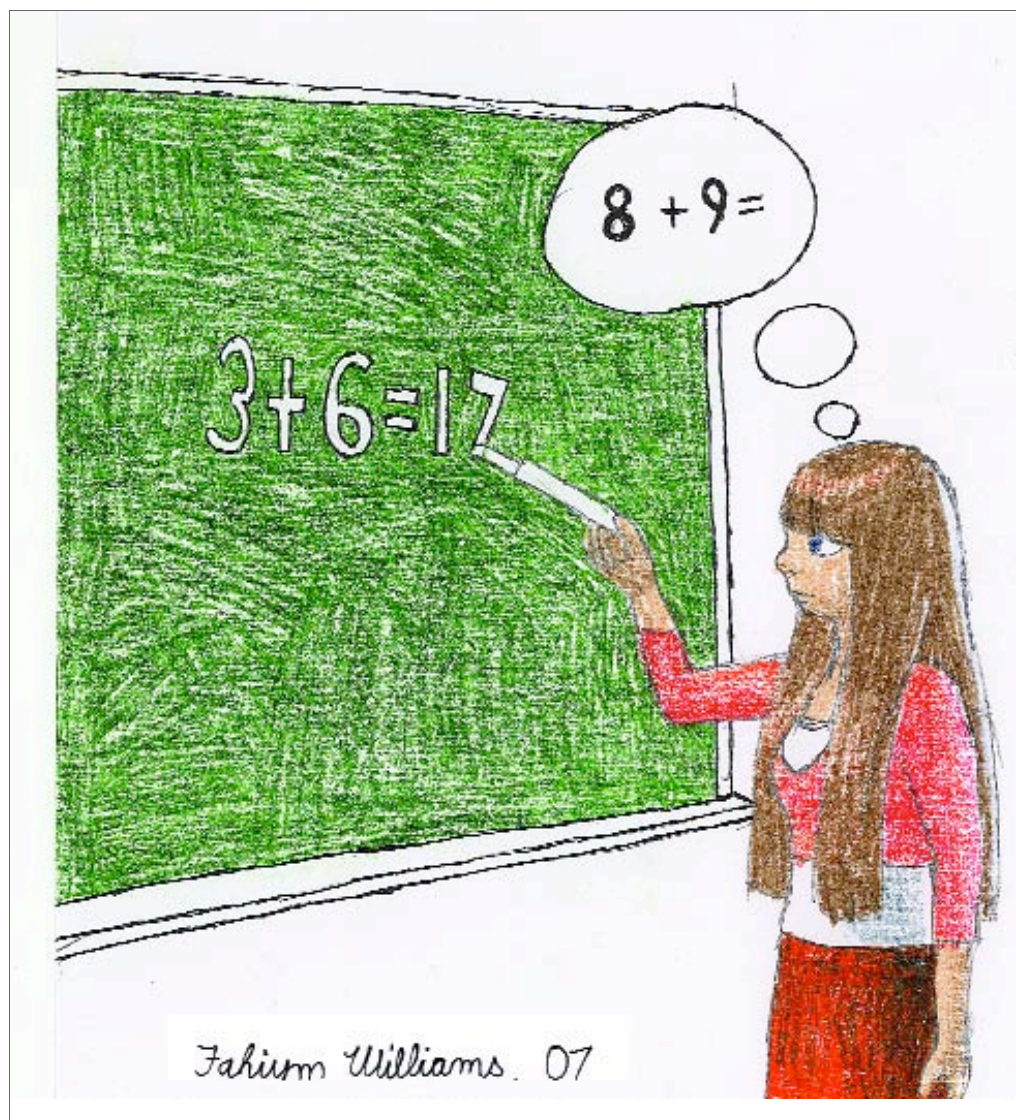
Bballer311: Wow I would never think someone like you has a disability.

TheMan212: Tom, millions of people around the world have disabilities and they live normal lives just like you and I do.

Bballer311: I guess I really never knew that. I always thought of someone in a wheelchair as a person with a disability, not somebody like you. So if you're still up for it would you like to see a movie at eight o'clock? How about Mission Impossible?

TheMan212: Yeah, sounds good to me. I bet you didn't know Tom Cruise, who is the main character in Mission Impossible, has a learning disability.

Bballer311: No I didn't. I guess you learn something new everyday.



Two I's talk about their IEPs

Continued from page 5

in the IEP process helps students see how their education can prepare them for a job or continuing education or training.

Two students from two different high schools share their experiences with IEP's by answering a few questions. Each school has to follow the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) passed by Congress which tells them how an IEP needs to be developed and written.

QUESTIONS:

• **How did you learn about IEP's? Who first told you about it and what did you think about it at first? Have you read your IEP?**

First student: I first learned about IEP's from my mom who explained to me that it was a plan to help students who had a different kind of learning style. My eighth grade resource room teacher was the first one in school to go over my IEP with me. I have read my IEP and agree with most of it.

Second student: My parents first told me about IEP's when I was in fourth grade but at that age I couldn't really understand it all. I have read it and I do agree with it.

• **Have you ever been to an IEP meeting (some schools call them committee on special education meetings)? Describe what it was like.**

First student: I have never been to an IEP meeting but I plan to go to my meeting this year.

Second student: Yes, it was actually a bit boring. I didn't talk much but everyone else at the meeting did. My resource room teacher, social worker, speech therapist, my parents, the principal and the chair of the committee were there. I was only expected to listen and take notes. I felt that everything went all right.

• **What do you like best/least about school?**

First student: What I like best about school is seeing my friends and what I like least are bullies.

Second student: I like whatever I'm doing best in (mostly math and gym class). I don't like kids who are always breaking school rules, being annoying and disrespectful to teachers. But I'm trying to cope with the fact that there will always be jerks in school.

• **How would you change your school if you were in charge?**

First student: If I were in charge I would do more to help kids show respect for others.

Second student: I believe that the school's already fine as it is but the discipline code could be enforced a little more.

• **Do students with disabilities get treated differently in your school?**

First student: The kids in my school who have serious disabilities don't get teased but I think more could be done to make them feel more a part of everything.

Second student: I believe so, yes. The students with disabilities get a lot more help from the teachers. I don't think students with disabilities are treated unfairly or in a bad way.

• **What would you tell other kids who are preparing to go to an IEP meeting to do?**

First student: Even though I haven't been to one myself I think it is important to go over the Plan with your parents and your teacher to make sure you understand what it says and that you will have a chance to say that you agree or disagree with it.

Second student: I'd tell them there's nothing to worry about. It's mostly just your parents sitting down with your teachers. You review your goals on your IEP and talk about how you're achieving them during the school year.

• **Tell us anything you like about special education.**

First student: I like my special education classes when they are big. I don't like them as much when there are only a few students. Sometimes it's hard for me to have an aide because it makes me feel different from other kids and makes me feel as if I can't do things on my own.



Second student: It's nice to know that someone's there to help if you need it and that you have extra time to work on a project for a certain class.

• **Have you heard about something called transition services planning (it helps you plan for what you will be doing after school)?**

First student: I am a junior this year. For the last few years my resource room teachers have asked me what I think I would like to do and where I would like to live after high school. I told them that I would like a job helping people and that I would like to live with my family. I know from my mom that this is what transition planning is about and that this year people from school will be helping us figure all of this out.

Second student: No, not until now did I know what the term "transition services planning" meant. My social worker and resource room teacher have talked with me about what my plans are after college. When they asked me I would give them an honest answer.

We will continue this column on IEPs in future issues. If you have stories to share or questions about IEPs or the federal and state laws that protect your rights to an education, please e-mail our student editor at roryharte777@gmail.com. We would like your feedback.

Hi ho, hi ho, it's off to work they go

Fabio Botarelli
Trinity College
Hartford

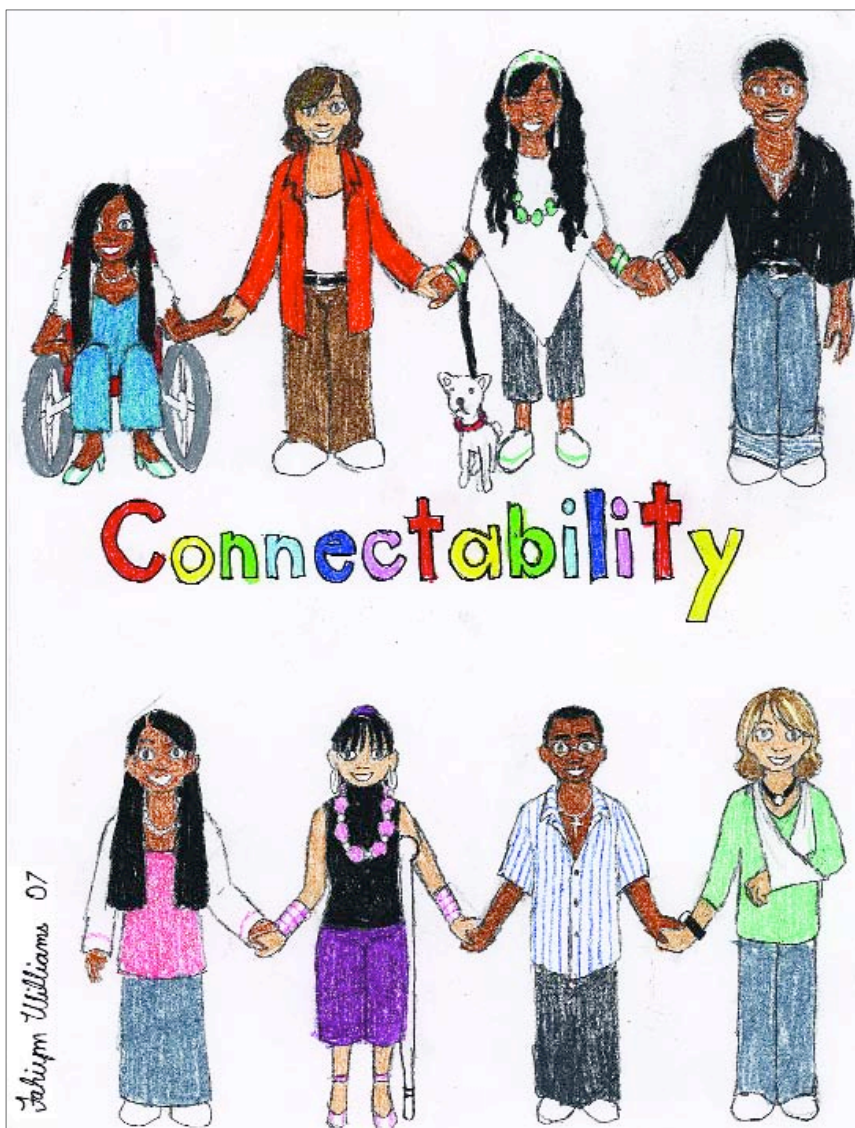
In today's world there are hardly any provisos that could generate the same magnitude of anxiety as "unemployment." It is treacherous phantom that haunts most American workers at least once in their lifetime and for an individual with disabilities this phantom could prove to be a constant visitor, turning a happy home into a haunted house. More than anything these individuals do not want to be a liability or play the role of the victim preferring to feel a sense of self-worth, liberation and financial independence which they hope to find in the workforce.

All around the nation large corporations like McDonald's and Wal-Mart recruit employees with disabilities to perform menial tasks as cashiers, maintenance workers and store greeters. This move is oftentimes a propaganda campaign that feebly attempts to show how much the company "cares" for its employees. Financially the corporation may receive government sponsored benefits for hiring a certain amount or percentage of disabled workers. What the company doesn't disclose is the frequency at which these employees are fired or mistreated while in the process of completing their tasks.

In an effort to secure disabled employees with stable jobs, Randy Lewis, the senior vice president of Walgreen's Distribution and Logistics Center came up with a strategy of making new technology easier to operate for individuals with cognitive disabilities. Mr. Lewis's genuine act of philanthropy sprang from observing the difficulties of his nineteen-year old son, Austin, who has autism. He had read about the future of persons with autism and was appalled when he discovered that the unemployment rate of individuals with autism is as high as 95 percent. As part of his business strategy, workers with disabilities are required to train for one year under a job coach without pay. Once they successfully complete the training process, they are guaranteed jobs with a starting salary of \$10.85 an hour, with an increase of up to \$13.80 per hour after two years of employment. Since its inception, this business strategy has paid off in dividends as Walgreen's disabled workforce has grown to almost two hundred employees. Not surprisingly they have proved to be harder workers than their

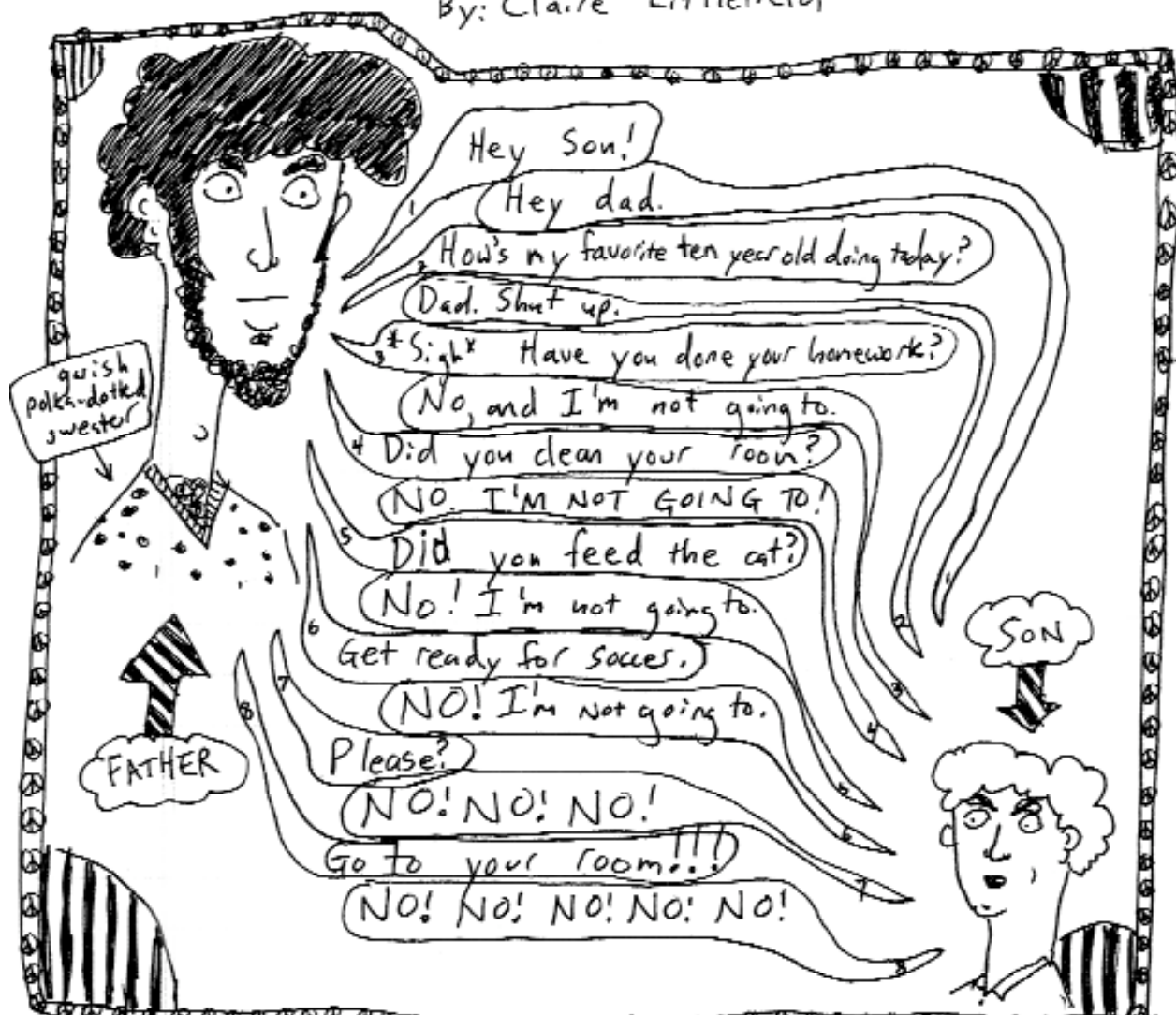
mainstreamed coworkers and on some occasions were more productive in all three distribution departments.

To mainstream society this is a major breakthrough but in the big picture of things a lot more has to be achieved. The jobs in the distribution centers do not require a college degree and the chances of promotion to managerial positions are very rare. This does not take away from the progress made from the Walgreen's corporation but it is at most a stepping-stone to "greener" pastures. Employees with disabilities want promotions, bonuses and even a nice car to drive. Perhaps because employment is so difficult for individuals with disabilities to find, working for Walgreen's could pass as a sign of success. But when someone with a disability adds something of value either through invention or entrepreneurship or just hard work and the everyday application of good work habits, they ought to feel as rewarded as their non-disabled co-workers.



Oppositional Defiant Disorder

By: Claire Littlefield



This behavior is very typical of Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD). ODD causes a person to be disobedient, hostile, and defiant towards figures of authority. ☹️ ☹️ ☹️ ☹️ ☹️

To be officially diagnosed, a patient needs to fit the following criteria:

- 1) the defiance must interfere with the child's ability to function in normal environments
- 2) the defiance cannot be the result of another disorder, such as depression
- 3) The child must exhibit the following problems for at least 6 months
 - losing temper
 - easily annoyed
 - refuses to follow rules
 - deliberately annoying people
 - blaming others for mistakes
 - arguing with adults
 - angry and resentful
 - spiteful or even vengeful ☹️ ☹️ ☹️

* This disorder can be treated with the proper treatment *

Assistive Technology 101

Alexis Kim
Niskayuna High School
Niskayuna

When we turn on a television with a remote control, open a garage door from our car or watch our grandmother use an adaptive can opener, we are living in a world where technology assists us and those around us. People with disabilities can benefit from technology as well. The Assistive Technology Act, a federal law passed in 1998, gives people with disabilities of all ages access to technology. Special education regulations provide a way for students ages 3-21 to be evaluated for assistive technology and to have it included on their Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). An IEP is a written document that describes all of the services, special programs and supports a student with a disability needs to benefit from an education. An IEP team, including the student and parents, writes the IEP every year.



What is it? Assistive technology is defined as any item, piece of equipment or system that is used to increase, maintain or improve the capabilities of a disabled person. This is a broad definition and enables students to take advantage of a huge range of options.

How can a student get AT? A comprehensive evaluation of a student determines the need for AT. Evaluations can take place at the parents' request or because teachers or therapists identify a possible need. The evaluation is conducted by someone knowledgeable of assistive technology who may be assisted by an occupational therapist or speech and language pathologist knowledgeable of the student. A good AT evaluation will include observation of

There are numerous technological solutions to meet the specific needs of individuals.

To learn more, visit:

www.pluk.org
www.abledata.com
www.enablemart.com

Computer technology is a powerful tool to enable individuals with disabilities.

A study commissioned by the *Microsoft Accessibility Newsletter* reports that 57% of computer users are likely or very likely to benefit from the use of accessible technology; 44% of computer users employ some form of accessible technology.

These include software transforming text to spoken audio, which is useful for those with vision impairments and reading disabilities and software transforming speech to text, which is useful for individuals with physical impairments and dysgraphia.

For more on these tools, visit:

www.apple.com/accessibility
www.microsoft.com/enable

the student in a school and home setting. Where and how the student will use the AT is important to the evaluator.

When can a student get AT? The AT evaluator will report back to the IEP team for discussion of the evaluation findings. If the team determines, based on the evaluation, that the student can benefit from AT, it can be added to the IEP. School district staff then take responsibility for ordering the equipment. The IEP should include clear directions for teaching the student, parents and school staff how to use the equipment. Schools are responsible for the maintenance and repair of AT.

Where can AT be used? AT can be used in the classroom, in study halls and in extra-curricular activities. If the student requires use of an AT device like a lap top to complete homework assignments, then the student may take the device home.

**THANK YOU TO NYSUT,
OUR NEW 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

The *Disabilities Awareness Newsletter* gets a new name — *Connect-Ability* — and a new sponsor

Catharine McHugh
Newsletter advisor

Our ability to stay connected with one another in our family life, school life and in our communities is important. By connecting with others we learn, have fun and share experiences. Connections give us confidence and strength. The people we connect with can teach us new things and help us see different perspectives but connecting with people different from us isn't always easy. We have to be willing to take a risk in the beginning and then put in the effort and time to stay connected.

This newsletter started out 11 years ago when I invited a group of high school students with disabilities and a group of high school students without disabilities to get together to talk. Before that day, most of the students without disabilities had never encountered a student with a disability much less sat in a room and talked with them for three hours. Sparks didn't fly. No one cried or asked to leave. There was a lot of silence at first. Some students listened and then asked questions and some didn't speak at all. At the end of three hours they agreed, on their own, to continue the connection they had made on that day and to get others to connect with one another as well to help raise awareness of disabilities and the many high school students affected by them.

They took a risk coming to that meeting and they

learned something. As time went on during monthly meetings they began to understand one another better, have fun and make friends. They got connected. It was their idea to start this newsletter which was distributed to every high school in New York state. They wanted to write and draw pictures and tell their stories to help other students understand that connecting with someone with a disability is a good thing.

Since that first group of students got together dozens of students have written for the newsletter and served on the editorial board. Over the years board members tried to find a better name for the newsletter but were so busy putting it together that they always ended up calling it what it was, the *Disabilities Awareness Newsletter*. Now the current editorial board has found a new name and a new sponsor. NYSUT (New York State United Teachers) has generously agreed to support the newsletter. At our August 2007 meeting we agreed on a new name, *Connect-Ability*. The new name emphasizes what the first editorial board tried to do — connect students and focus on ability.

I want to thank the group of students who took a risk and started this newsletter back in 1996 including Jennifer Baumann, Maria Comella, Steve Corzon, Camie Danziger, Jessica Fein, Colin Harte, Justin Leader, Rebecca Lozman, Robert McHugh and Jessica Terwilliger. I think they all would be very proud that students are still staying connected and seeking connections through the newsletter.

WE NEED YOUR HELP

We are looking for creative students in grades 7-12 who are interested in writing essays, fiction or poetry related to disability.

We want this newsletter to connect students with and without disabilities so that we can learn from one another, make friendships and participate in an inclusive environment.

The *Disabilities Awareness Newsletter* has been in existence for 10 years and is sent to high schools across New York state. It is edited by high school students who serve on its editorial board. With this 2007 issue, the Newsletter has a new name, *Connect-Ability*, and a new sponsor, NYSUT (New York State United Teachers). It will be published each year, widely distributed and read by students, teachers and parents across the state.

If you or a student you know would like to learn more about how to participate in this exciting project, contact Terry McSweeney, NYSUT assistant in Educational Services, (800) 342-9810, ext. 6047.



Behind the scenes — From left, in front: Alexis Kim, Mitchell Goliber, Bridget Ford, Claire Littlefield, Advisor Catharine McHugh. In the back: Fabio Botarelli, Cassie Ford, NYSUT's Maria Neira, Editor Rory Harte, Austen Crittenden, Shane Crittenden, Writing Coach Thomas Corrado. Not pictured: Andrea Garcia, Robbie McNary, Stephen Schubmehl, Art Editor Fahiyim Williams and Advisor Lucille Larney.

www.nysut.org/connect