

Peer Advocacy – A look back

In this interview, Anna, who will be a college sophomore in the fall of 2016, reflects back on her involvement during middle school in the innovative "Peer Advocacy" project. The project was designed to connect students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers in meaningful ways to help them navigate bullying situations.

Anna was one of the students first selected to participate in the pilot, which paired four regular education students with David, a sixth grade student with Down syndrome receiving special education services. The students were provided with education, support, and encouragement designed to help them understand how to help or intervene if they knew David was being bullied.

David was nonverbal, often isolated from peers, and vulnerable to inappropriate behavior. It was important that he had peer allies who could be aware of potential bullying behavior in the school and who knew how to take action.

During the first year, the program quickly expanded to include 20 advocates and students with disabilities. The following year, there were more than 50 students involved on a voluntary basis. Today, eight years later, the school continues to support the Peer Advocacy program, and more than 400 students have been involved. From the initial pilot a free online toolkit was made available to other schools who have also successfully implemented peer advocacy projects across the nation.

Special thanks to Anna for her insightful, honest, and powerful responses. Most importantly, thank you to Anna for being an advocate who changed lives.

- Julie Hertzog, David's mom



Questions:

In what ways did the Peer Advocate program have an impact on your life?

Overall, the Peer Advocate program put my life into perspective, changing the way that I looked at the world around me. Hope's joy over spotting a butterfly and David's fervor for all things Scooby Doo taught me to enjoy the simple things in life. The students with disabilities that I was working with revealed to me the power of enthusiasm through their exuberant attitudes towards life.

While my classmates and I begrudgingly trudged into the school at 8 am, grumbling about the unfortunate hour at which we were required to wake up, Hope and David arrived at school each day ready to learn — and with smiles on their faces. Despite all the struggles that they had been through in their lives, they still got up each and every morning, ready to seize the day.

Additionally, Peer Advocates made me more confident in myself and my abilities to change the world around me. I distinctly remember sitting down with Julie Hertzog, David's mom and the Director of PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center, a few months after joining Peer Advocates to discuss how the program was going and what things we (the Peer Advocates) thought we could improve upon. The reason I can so vividly recall this memory is not due to the conversation itself, but rather the realization I had during the conversation: "I really can make an impact on the world around me. My actions matter."

Sure, I'd heard versions of this same message throughout my life, usually from teachers trying to boost classroom morale and encourage us to make good decisions, but I never had taken the message to heart. After all, I was one girl from a small town in Minnesota, and there were billions of other people in the world. Through hearing Julie describe the changes she had seen in her son David, the doubts of my ability to change the world around me dissolved. For the first time, the message stuck.

I realized that you don't have to go out and solve world hunger to impact the world, you can positively influence one or two people's lives. In turn, those one or two people will, through your impact, change the world for others and the cycle will repeat itself. The results are bound to be extraordinary.

What was, in your opinion, the most important thing that you learned throughout your time in Peer Advocates?

I feel that the most important thing I learned in Peer Advocates was to put a person before their disability. If you are unfamiliar with this concept, it is called "people first language" and involves describing what a person has, rather than what a person is. It essentially involves using language such as "He/She has a disability" instead of "He/She is a disabled person." Labeling someone first by the disability that they have is placing more value on their disability than on who they are as a person.

For example, imagine you failed a test. Are you automatically a failure or are you a person who failed a test today? Failing one test does not make you, as an individual, a failure. Similarly, having a disability does not define a person. They are not their disability; they are, first and foremost, a human being.

I find this to be an incredibly powerful message for everyone — those with disabilities and those without — to understand. It extends far beyond just discussing people with disabilities. In fact, this mentality is one that I frequently employed this past year during the struggles of my first year of college. Every time something didn't go as I had planned, I stopped and took a moment to remind myself that one single incident, test score, or mistake does not define me.

What changes did you see in the students with disabilities throughout this program?

Overall, the students with disabilities seemed to grow much more confident during their time in the Peer Advocate program. Prior to the program, David walked through the hallway with his head down, not speaking or making eye contact with anyone. Now, he gives enthusiastic hellos to his multitude of new friends, complete with high-fives or "knucks" (sometimes both!).

The students with disabilities were noticeably more included in various aspects of school life — in the lunchroom, during activities in gym class, or while walking in the halls. Classmates began to see them as the wonderful people they are, instead of as their disability, and that made all the difference in the confidence of each of the students with disabilities. It was, and still is, a truly delightful thing to see.

Did the Peer Advocate program seem to impact your school's culture?

Absolutely. Let me start off by saying that the number of high fives in the school increased exponentially! David's enthusiasm for high fives and "knucks" was contagious. David, Hope, and the other students with disabilities went from being the "forgotten ones" to practically being held in the same esteem as celebrities. Hope's tendency to be a social butterfly showed its colors. She was never lacking a place to sit in the cafeteria. When David got new running shoes, at least half of the school knew about it by the end of the day.

Through the work of the Peer Advocate program, students within the school seemed more attuned to what actions and words qualify as bullying and how to deal with such bullying situations. The realization throughout

the school that bullying is not “just a part of growing up” and should not be accepted as “a fact of life” led to an increasing number of students standing up to bullies. I witnessed some of the most unexpected people speaking up, supporting students, and accepting others for who they are.

While my examples of inclusion and advocacy are encouraging, I want to be sure to emphasize that this process was not, in any way, easy or free of obstacles. It seemed that for every three steps forward, we took at least one step back. I recognize that thus far we have not been able to completely and absolutely eradicate bullying within my alma mater. However, I do know that we are well on our way to reaching this goal and strongly believe that someday, with the help of Peer Advocates, we will get there.

Did the program seem to affect the adults within the school?

When the Peer Advocate program first began, I had the sense that the staff didn’t see the value in adding yet another extracurricular activity to our school’s already lengthy list. Students already knew that they shouldn’t bully, so what more could this new club actually have to offer?

However, as the program’s impact began to be more readily noticeable in the school’s atmosphere, it became evident that support for the program was growing. Staff members began to readily engage in dialogue on bullying and the effects it has on students. I noticed staff members interacting with students who have disabilities at a greater frequency and increasing their efforts to integrate such students into their classrooms.

What is your favorite moment from your time in Peer Advocates?

As I have never been good at picking one thing that is my “favorite,” I will supply my top two favorite memories from my experience with Peer Advocates.

One moment that will stick with me forever stems not from a scheduled Peer Advocate activity, but rather through an outside interaction. Once, at a track meet, I ran into David, a student with Down syndrome who I was paired with at the time through the Peer Advocate program. As I jogged over to say hello after finishing my race, I witnessed a smile spread across David’s face. He pointed to me and exclaimed “Friend! Anna.” While this may seem insignificant to many people, it meant a great deal to me. This is because, first of all, David speaks infrequently, and secondly, that was the first time he had ever explicitly described me as a friend. Sure, I’d raced him around the track during Peer Advocates and high-fived him in the hallway, but David had never given me the honor of being named his friend, a position I was honored to hold.



David and Anna



Hope and Anna

My other favorite moment that stemmed from the Peer Advocate program comes by way of following David down the hallway one day during our senior year of high school. I was wandering along, lost in my own thoughts, when I heard a smacking sound. Startled, I looked up to see David enthusiastically giving a group of people high fives. As David continued to walk to his destination, I noticed that nearly everyone who he passed acknowledged his presence in some fashion, whether it be a high five (David’s specialty), giving “knucks,” greeting him with a “Sup David!” or commenting “Hey David, nice Vikings jersey!”

This sense of companionship and camaraderie touched me. Thinking back to six short years ago, when David kept his head down in the halls while his peers obliviously walked by, I was nearly brought to tears by the drastic change in the behaviors of both David and his peers. I have no doubt that the Peer Advocate program was a big factor, potentially the biggest factor in this positive transformation.

Were there any challenges?

Of course there were challenges. I wouldn't deem it a successful program unless there were a few obstacles to overcome. In my experience, I struggled the most with talking to loved ones about their disrespectful actions or words. In middle school particularly, I had several friends who enjoyed making frequent use of the word "retard." This bothered me a great deal because I had learned through Peer Advocates how disrespectful this word was to people with disabilities.

After overhearing a close friend jokingly claim someone was a "retard" (something she seemed to do quite frequently), I spent days contemplating how I should address the issue and worrying what she would think of me once I had. (Looking back, what did it matter what she thought of me?) Finally, I took a big breath and forced myself to get it over with. I explained that when she used the word "retard" I felt incredibly frustrated and explained my reasoning to her. While she was initially upset with me for "bossing her around" she eventually thanked me for letting her know that her words were a source of hurt.

I still wrestle with this issue today. I don't expect to ever be fully comfortable with confronting friends about the use of hurtful language. However, I do know that over time this conversation will slowly come more naturally.

How do you suggest standing up to a friend or someone you personally know who is being disrespectful towards people with disabilities?

Be firm and use your strengths to get the message across. Know that responding in the heat of the moment, when you are full of emotions, may not be the best response. Take a break and collect your thoughts, then decide what the best plan of action is. Additionally, recognize that the person who is delivering these hurtful words or actions may not know or understand how hurtful they are being. In the instance of the friend that I previously addressed, she had no idea of the implications that her words carried.

Take the moment as an opportunity to teach, not an opportunity to scold. I can say from personal experience that approaching the issue of hurtful language and actions in an angry or lecturing way has the potential to accomplish the complete opposite of what you are aiming for.

What does it take for a school to be successful in beginning and maintaining a Peer Advocate program?

A Peer Advocate program cannot succeed without the help of supportive adults who are willing to lead or take part in the program. It is helpful if there are adults who display support for the groups who are not actually a part of the program. Additionally, it is important to gather a wide range of students who are willing and enthusiastic to partake in the group.

One of the things that I found most beneficial about the program in my school was that it brought together individuals that wouldn't have really interacted if it weren't for the program. The first Peer Advocate group that I was a part of included three other individuals. I had talked to them, at most, two or three times during our seven-plus years of school together. I believe that this unique makeup of people is part of what made our program succeed.

The participants should not necessarily be just the people that are typically seen as leaders within the school. Sometimes a quiet, reserved student is better able to advocate for someone than an outgoing and outspoken person. It takes all types of people to change the world.

What was one unexpected result of the program?

Everything! I had no idea all of the things I would learn and new opportunities that would stem from joining the Peer Advocate program. If I had to choose, I would say that the most unexpected result of the program was that it uncovered my passion for advocacy and, ultimately, the career path that I would like to follow. I originally joined the program as an easy way to make more friends. Little did I know that one small decision would impact my life so completely.