

Circle of Friends: Building Bridges on an Island

By: Liz Saliba, Autism Specialist, Bainbridge Island School District

Our school district, although small comparatively, implemented several new programs, initiatives and curriculum recently. While many of these new programs focus on academics and common core standards, **we were pleased to announce that we were the very first Washington State chapter of *Circle of Friends*.**

As the school year began, there was a buzz amongst educators, parents and community members: "Tell me more about *Circle of Friends*!" We could only describe what we knew, not what we were yet to experience.

Is it possible for meaningful friendships to develop between disabled and non-disabled peers? Is this a token friendship program? How will this look? When will it happen?

We approached cautiously, carrying more questions than answers. Nonetheless, after our first training we moved forward and began meeting with the "friends" [students with special needs] and "peer friends" [general education students].

What I can tell you now, two trainings in and many lunch meetups in, is that **we had truly underestimated the power of compassion, the meaning of inclusion and the desire to be connected.** *Circle of Friends* has given us the opportunity for students to authentically, genuinely develop friendships.

The program looks a little different in each school building because of the age of the students, but the core of the program is consistent, students coming together and creating meaning.

While I have participated and observed so many of the lunch meetings, group gatherings and themed celebrations, **there is never a moment that I do not catch my breath.** I've heard that it's not the measure of how many breaths you take in life, but rather how many times you're rendered breathless.

A moment that will carry me through this lifetime...

In an elementary building, an SLP and I co-facilitate a social/emotional group for students with autism. We were meeting during a lunch period in order to accommodate for the students' varied schedules, and we decided to use this time for *Circle of Friends*, inviting "peer friends" to our meeting. This was a significant change for our "friends".

(CONTINUED)

The very first meeting, we came together as a large group for the purpose of introductions and playing games that facilitated, "*What do we have in common?*" All the students participated and enjoyed learning about features in which they share. **At the end of the group, we had one student with special needs who was sad to have it come to an end.** We got out a calendar and showed him the next meeting date; he perked up and counted how many days in between. **(This student, to this day, counts down until his next *Circle of Friends* meetup.)** The SLP and I turned to one another so excited, so thrilled at the success of the meeting.

As we were revisiting the event, another one of our "friends" re-entered the room. This student is **a fourth-grade student with Asperger's.** He **walked up to us and said, "I really liked lunch today. For the first time I feel normal."** He turned and walked away; his life had changed forever in this moment and so had ours.

Breathless...