

BUILDING YOUNG MINDS

Achieving a Healthy Self-Image in Youth



2024 YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH LEADERSHIP AWARD ESSAY CONTEST WINNER

Grace Lyons

Why mental health? On November 7, 2023, one of my favorite people died by suicide. Her name was Abbey and, to me, her death was a shock and something I never could have imagined. Every summer, we'd sit by the pool talking about what we wanted to be when we grew up and making our wedding Pinterest boards while telling each other the latest boy drama. She truly lit up a room like no one I've ever known. When I found out she died by suicide, it took me a long time to actually comprehend what that meant and I was really confused as to how it could have happened. But instead of allowing my grief to consume me, I used it to fuel me to better my school community and the people inside it. I used it to honor Abbey's legacy.

Abbey died by suicide the weekend before she was supposed to go back to in-person school, and it has caused me to wonder if the timing of her return to school was a factor in other decisions. Even though school should be a safe place, in reality, for many students, maybe even most, it isn't. Things like negative stereotypes, immature teenagers who don't think before they speak, and people being unable to accept others who may not be exactly like themselves can turn what are supposed to be the best years of someone's life into their worst. Abbey's death made me so much more aware of my peers mocking each other, their heartless suicide jokes, and the fact that they think telling someone to kill themselves is funny—disgusting, I know. These people made me aware that a lot of students don't have a safe space in school.

With the hope of helping reduce the anxiety caused by both the social and academic pressures placed on students in a school environment, I joined Our Minds Matter, my school's mental health club, and Link Crew, a program that pairs upperclassmen with underclassmen to help them navigate through the stress of their first year of high school. I also started volunteering with the students in the special education program through Buddies Club and Unified Track. Every student should feel as though school is their safe space. That's why I focus on making people feel like they belong at school through these programs. Whether it's through discussions in my various club meetings, checking in on everyone with a one-on-one conversation in the halls, or just giving a student sitting by themselves a compliment, I am showing that I care and that I notice them.

In a school with over 2,400 students, it's easy to feel lost among people you can't relate to, but in OMM, Buddies Club, Unified Track, and Link Crew I feel like I can help people find a way to fit in. In OMM, I'm allowed to plan meetings that solely focus on raising awareness for mental health and helping people find ways to cope. Last May, I ran a student-led discussion on the school's effect on mental health. Although students were making heart-breaking statements about how much stress and anxiety school causes them, seeing students connect by bonding over similar experiences made me feel like exposing all of these painful emotions and challenging my peers to talk about their difficult feelings was well worth it. Why? It made these students feel like they weren't the only person hurting and confirmed that they weren't alone.

Having a leadership role in Link Crew, Buddies Club, and Unified Track allows me to make a difference. Through these extra-curriculars, I'm able to teach people how to embrace differences rather than run from them. During one of my first Link Crew visits to go check in on my freshmen in September, I made it a point to acknowledge that September is Suicide Prevention Month and that with all of the changes they were going through while adapting to high school, it was important to take care of themselves and that if they needed anything, I was here for them. Buddies Club and Unified Track have given me a unique way to help the students in the special education program. In most cases, asking about their day is enough to make them smile and feel valued, especially since a lot of general education students don't even notice them. Without knowing how to treat someone who is different from us, we'll never be able to have a truly accepting school community.

Embracing differences isn't easy, especially at a high school age. However, we are capable of doing small things to reach others. That's why I'll always go out of my way to have a conversation with someone or just do a good deed for them. Small acts of kindness like these can make someone feel like they belong and less alone, and part of me thinks that if Abbey knew she wasn't the only one struggling and that if she had someone who could relate to what she was going through, she would have been able to talk to them about what she was feeling and her story may not have ended yet. I'm trying to make a difference in a million small ways every day. In doing so, I'm honoring Abbey.

