Real Joy

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" It's a common question that all kids are asked, and personally, my answer was always simple - a choir teacher. Since elementary school, choir has always been a passion of mine, which meant many contests, festivals, assemblies, and even choir awards. Becoming a choir director seemed like an easy and obvious choice, but after meeting another student in 2015, I quickly realized that I was destined for another career path that I had never expected.

It was in seventh grade in my choir class that I met someone who became my best friend, and he made an impact on my life in a surprising way. Meeting him not only changed what I wanted to do in life, but he also changed my life. We were not in the same classes since he had special needs, and it was hard to know how to talk to him or act around him. I did not know much about special needs kids, but what I did know was that he was very happy and expressed a kind of joy I had never witnessed before. He gave his all to everything, and his contagious laughter and ability to find joy in every moment was admirable. He sang, danced, and called me his "buddy" and friend. He showed me what real joy is, and he taught me to be more positive and thankful for the blessings we have in life.

Later that year, he invited me to his class for a Christmas party. It was an honor that he wanted me to be a part of his class celebration. At the party, it was more than just the food and fun in the room that caught my attention. There was a special bond between all the students in the room. They were united. Seeing the joy in one boy brought me so much happiness, but seeing this same joy from several students was fascinating to me. After talking to the teacher about my newfound interest in the special needs setting, I started to visit the classroom two days per week
during my lunch break. It was during this time that true relationships between myself and the students started to form. The class serves students who are deaf and hard of hearing with multiple disabilities such as autism and other special needs. All of the students were socially united even with the different disabilities they each had, which was a unique experience for me. In the eighth grade, I ate lunch with the special needs students everyday. I considered them good friends of mine, and I loved spending time with them.

My school offers an opportunity for students who are juniors and seniors to be an academic peer tutor where they can assist in a classroom for one of their class periods. My desire for education and helping other kids only inspired me to take advantage of this unique opportunity. The personal relationships that were built during our lunch times together were special, but this allowed me to further understand their needs on an academic level. After getting approval from the teacher and the administration, I was set to be the first academic peer tutor the school ever had in the special education department. This was an opportunity I was looking forward to.

That summer, I dedicated much of my time studying Deaf culture and American Sign Language. The beauty of the language was fascinating, which made it truly enjoyable to learn. The school year began and it was time to start working with the students. It was heartbreaking to learn that many of the students who came to the class for the first time could not recognize their own name, but they made incredible academic progress since they started in the special education class. My role was to work with the students on their spelling and math, and it was quickly evident that they had an interest in learning, which was very admirable.
There was a new student that year that I quickly built a special relationship with. He first came to the school feeling very nervous and insecure of his new and unfamiliar surroundings. My heart was hurting for him because he had a desire to be a normal kid, but he could not verbally express any of his feelings because he was nonverbal. About a month into the school year, the student developed better behavior and immediately earned a special place in my heart. Personally, being there to experience this student’s behavioral transformation shown from the beginning taught me how the classroom changes lives and has a positive impact on all of the students, including mine. The teacher and paraprofessionals taught the students more than just academics, but also life skills and social skills. For example, there was a student who came to the school eating off the floor, and the teachers taught the student how to use a fork and spoon to eat. In addition, they teach them how to cook and how to use manners. Also, the students go on interactive field trips such as the zoo and grocery stores to improve their social skills in public. The class is a true family, and it is an honor to be a part of it.

My role as an academic peer tutor continued through my sophomore year and this year I am a student intern in the class for three class periods in the morning. Now when I am asked what I want to be when I grow up, my deepest desire and calling is to be a special education teacher. The students teach me everyday what I am made for and what real joy is. People do not know the capabilities that special needs kids and adults have until they see it firsthand. They teach me to have joy in everything. People who are not around special needs kids, like I once was, are missing out on an opportunity to experience a kind of joy that they cannot experience with anyone else. I never would have been where I am today without meeting my buddy in choir in the seventh grade. He began the most incredible, heartfelt journey in my life, and it is exciting
to think about what wonderful memories will be made with my friends as we continue our time together and change the world for the better.