

INCLUSION TEAMING

Stepping into another's mind

by Karen Dydzuhn

Let's face it: Teens are more apt to listen to one of their peers than to absorb well-meaning advice or information from an adult. Moreover, Catherine A. Hogan, executive director of Inclusion Teaming and psychotherapist, firmly believes that acquiring communication skills — and understanding the different the ways individuals convey their messages — is best learned in a reciprocal environment, where young people teach each other through sharing their experiences.

Since September, Ms. Hogan has brought

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Sean Donaghue, 18, of Darien

together a group of teens comprised of students from Fairfield Preparatory School who have "typical" communication skills with those who have been diagnosed with autism-spectrum disorders, such as Asperger's Syndrome. Ms. Hogan's goal is to give all students the tools and strategies

they need to communicate effectively and to understand each other's differences. It is through this process that bullying could be abated and children with disabilities could receive support from their peers.

Ms. Hogan pointed out that "65 percent

of students are not involved with hassling students with differences." However, they don't know what to do when this negative behavior occurs. By participating in weekly groups, young people are trained in communication diversity.

Fairfield Prep senior Sean Donaghue, 18, of Darien said that the group, which meets every Wednesday evening for 75 minutes, has helped him to better understand his classmates. "I realized that there are kids whose brains work differently than my own," Sean explained. "I can definitely see at school how kids are smart in different ways." Ms. Hogan said that young people,



Volunteers (l to r) Brendan Wendt, college senior; Johnny Garcia, high school senior; Sean Donaghue, high school senior; Justin Sherman, college graduate; Conor McGovern, high school senior; Justin Troccoli, high school senior.

such as Sean, want to "help others get a fair shake because they intuitively believe it should be so."

Justin Sherman, 23, of Weston, a peer leader for the group, also has Asperger's Syndrome. However, with Ms. Hogan's help, he's learned to overcome many of the communication obstacles that challenge people with this disorder. For example, because those with Asperger's tend to view things concretely and literally, they often stare at the speaker's mouth rather than their eyes, where many non-verbal communication cues are provided.

Justin said that he has learned to look people in the eye when speaking to them, but he's still uncomfortable using this technique, so to defuse his tension, he lets his listeners know that he's feeling stressed. Ms. Hogan recalled a time last year when he was speaking to some Boy Scout leaders and prefaced his comments on communication differences with a candid statement about how nervous he was to look at them. "I was just being honest," Justin said.

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Connor McGovern

He recently graduated from Curry College and is now in the process of interviewing for internships. "I like working with numbers just because I'm good at it," Justin said.

One of the issues that often arise for people with spectrum disorders is that their comments or actions are misinterpreted. Ms. Hogan said that this could be especially troublesome in workplace settings. "They're concrete and to the point but there is no malcontent there," Ms. Hogan stated.

Justin likes helping others with spectrum disorders because he continues to learn by sharing his experiences. Using various

learning strategies ("I don't want to give away my curriculum," Hogan jokes), all members of the group strengthen the way they convey their thoughts and feelings. They work as a parliamentary committee and make sure each week that everyone participates equally in the discussion.

Connor McGovern, 17, of Darien, said that working with the Inclusion Teaming's group has been "a great learning experience. It's been good to see how other kids' minds think compared to my own. We definitely see how we can learn from each other. Also, we get a lot of work done at every meeting."

Justin Troccoli of Norwalk agreed. He pointed out that even though the group

members have different interests, they can still talk to each other. "I like to talk about hockey and there's another guy who comes here who loves cars. He knows everything about cars and I don't, but we could still find things to talk about."

The volunteers from Fairfield Prep receive credit toward the school's community-service requirements. However, Ms. Hogan pointed out that they've all agreed to continue to participate until the end of the year. "I like being with my friends," said Connor.

Although Inclusion Teaming has about 45 students on its roster of volunteers, Ms. Hogan hopes that more students with communication differences will step forward. Inclusion Teaming is currently running groups for students with Attention Deficit, Non-Verbal Learning and Down Syndrome, as well as those with Asperger's Syndrome.

For more information, 203-254-0100; inclusionteaming.org.