

Lauren Cronk

Webster Schoeder High School Class of 2011

Daniel's Sister

Growing up, I was Daniel's little sister. My older brother established such a reputation that by the time I was in third grade, most of the faculty and every last upperclassman in Plank Road North Elementary School knew who Daniel Cronk was. Now, my brother was not and still is not an athlete or a socialite. He could be a straight-A student if grades were among his handful of atypical endeavors. He was never the class clown, and he isn't the teacher's pet. He is autistic. Little is known about the exact cause of autism, which is characterized in Daniel by his compulsive orderliness, nearly unbreakable rituals and routine, and utter social awkwardness. Because he is not exclusively dependent on others to survive and remarkably intelligent, my brother can be classified as high-functioning. Despite this, looking back I cannot help but feel immense sorrow about the way Dan's peers treated him — with raucous disdain and childish derision. With the proper education, future generations of disabled people will not have to suffer as Daniel has, and, most importantly, the vast chasm between those not and those handicapped will be bridged forever.

As a citizen of Rochester who has spent her entire life with a person who has a disability, I raise my voice not only on behalf of those who are informed and humane, but also of those who dwell in the noxious shadow of ignorance. My childhood, although joyous and fulfilling, was caked with contempt and anger toward my brother and his circumstances. I found myself denying any relation to him when asked, or rather accused, if that weird Dan kid was my sibling. Like any child, I was eager to gain the attention and love of my parents, whose focus was often my brother's behavior in school and what medication the doctor was recommending at the time. When Daniel was finally diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome and high-functioning autism in his freshman year of high school, I was relieved that I could for once tell others what truly afflicted my brother without stumbling over a rash of poorly-rehearsed terminology. As time went on and I explored the anomaly of disabilities I came to understand and can now truly admire individuals with disabilities. They are the most genuine, authentic, and deserving people I have ever had the honor of meeting.

People with disabilities, whether physical, mental, or emotional, are far more ordinary than most "normal" people are willing to accept. They merit as much, if not more, respect and assistance as the rest of the population. While taking special measures to provide challenged people with quality education is undeniably important, it is also critical to take the time to teach others about people with disabilities.

In my fifth grade gym class, there was a unit which we spent rolling around in wheelchairs, walking through an obstacle course with blindfolds, and giving directions to ear-plugged classmates. The purpose of this, of course, was to try to develop an appreciation for those with disabilities. There was also a boy whom I and my young colleagues were in class with that had low-functioning autism, certainly expanding our awareness and understanding. However, I heard no more of the matter after starting middle school, despite its clear presence in our community. This is disconcerting. I do not doubt that the minds of children are the most impressionable, but it would be naive and ignorant to believe that after puberty the information receptors in the brain seal shut. People my age, itching to get their work and driver's permits, engulfed in the latest hallway rumors, are an exceedingly vital portion of Rochester. As the youth and future of our community, young people should be the hub of any educational effort, particularly when the topic involves overcoming differences.

Rochester has both a proud and astounding legacy as a welcoming sanctuary for disabled men and women of all backgrounds. With both large-scale institutions such as Rochester Institute of

Technology, home to a prominent on-campus deaf community, and ABVI (Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired), and smaller residential organizations like Mary Cariola's Children's Center, Monroe County has a distinguished history of accepting and aiding disabled people. Unfortunately, these resources, however plentiful, do not reach enough young people. Thanks in large part to their "in between-ness," young people are beacons for older generations and small children alike. As disabilities do not affect one singular national, sexual, ethnic, or religious group more than another, a fair representation of all would be present if an event educating others on disabilities were to take place. It could be easily hosted by a facility like RIT and contributed to by the many generous businesses and organizations in Rochester. A free of charge, annual celebration of our differences, highlighting and showcasing those of us with handicaps like blindness, deafness, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, paralysis, and autism, to mention but a few. Geared toward young people as well as old, such a festival would include goods for sale created by disabled people, benefitting not only them but also the local economy. Different groups and specialized medical supply businesses would be invited to set up shop to inform and offer their equipment at discounts. Raffles and auctions could be held for costly but needed items like wheelchairs and other medical devices. A section for seeing eye dogs — as friendly and beneficial as the associations they work for — could be established, a superb and lovable treat for anyone, disabled or not. Events like wheelchair races, available for both handicapped and "regularly" functioning people, with small prizes would be held and moderated. Stations would be assembled where those of us without a disability could explore what it is like to be blind, deaf, dumb, paralyzed, or without a limb, similar to my own grade school gym class experience. Examples of braille for the blind and music accompanied by light shows for the deaf would also be made available. People like speech and music therapists would be allocated areas to educate others — show them how music can help a child with brain damage how to speak and how sign language can be taught to a mute three-year-old. Wouldn't such a festival of learning and celebration be an excellent resource and fun event for Rochester citizens of all ages and backgrounds? It would bind our towns together with a common cause: to provide for those less able to care for themselves and to teach ourselves acceptance of those differences. Not only would an event like this bring together people with handicaps, it would link various ethnicities, religions, and classes, differences that more often than not leave us alone and ignorant.

With an autistic older brother whom I adore and admire, I have been exposed to much more than most fifteen-year-old's. However, I have ample faith that it is possible for a community like Rochester, so gloriously diverse and captivating, to bridge its shameful abyss of differences. By educating others and circulating awareness and regard for disabled individuals, it is absolutely possible. How marvelous would it be to see a small child with a handicap being accepted and helped by his schoolmates and the parents of his schoolmates? A miraculous sight indeed.