

Acceptance

The other day I was at my locker when an eighth grader grabbed the backpack of a sixth grade student. The sixth grader started running after the eighth grader after finally giving up. He leaned against the wall and slid down to the ground with his head in his hand. This boy was new to the school. He was a foot smaller than most of the kids and spoke with a thick accent. Sometimes he wore sandals and colorful shirts. I felt bad for him but didn't know what to do. "What if it were me?" I thought.

I started to think about my life and how the world has treated me. Have I ever been bullied or treated with disrespect? The only thing I could remember was in elementary school when another student made fun of my last name. Potocki sounds nothing like taco, this boy wouldn't stop teasing me. It bothered me but I could live with it. I never said anything to anyone and forgot about it until this day.

I consider myself to be different than others yet the same as others. I see myself as an artist, a dancer, an athlete, an A-student, a singer and a good friend. I am of average height and weight for my age and I don't have any disabilities or big scars. I speak English clearly and don't stutter. It sounds like I am full of myself, but that's not the point. I guess I'm lucky that I don't know what it feels like to be teased or disrespected. Sure there have been times when people ignore me when I'm trying to make a point, but it doesn't bother me.

My parents tell us stories about kids being teased in grade school. I guess that's why they are very strict about not teasing others and treating people as you would like to be treated. I completely agree with them because I can see how upset my mom gets when she hears about bullying because someone is different. I also see the pain that is left by the person being picked on.

The other night at dinner, my parents asked my brother about a neighborhood kid, "Joe" that seems to be very unpopular. My brother said that every day, "Joe" asks to play kickball, but the other kids say to him, "No, we don't want you to play with us". He just walks away and sits alone on the playground. My parents asked my brother to stand up for him the next time it happens and get the other kids to let him play with them. My brother agreed. The very next day at recess, the groups were kicking teams for kickball when the person standing was "Joe". My brother said, "Joe, you can be in our team." The other kids started to grumble when my brother came back with, "What did he ever do to you?" The crowd finally agreed and they all went on to play ball. It actually worked!

Doesn't it just take a bit of courage? Courage is the strength within to stand up for what is right. Having the courage to stand up for others who were not getting respected, can change the way we live in New Jersey as well as in the world. Most children are afraid of kids that

are being bigger or stronger. One day, you might be in a situation like that and might be the one and only one to stand up for them. You will make a huge difference in that child's life.

If there is a new kid in your class, you could offer to show them around the school or tell them what they will be learning about or even just welcome them. That person probably feels a little unsecure because they don't know the people around them. You can introduce them to your friends and you could all hang out. Making them feel welcome helps make them a little more comfortable and welcome in their new school.

Back by my locker, the sixth grader was still sitting on the ground with his head in his hands. I carried on to Social Studies like nothing happened and pretended I knew nothing about an eighth grader taking a sixth grader's backpack. When I left my class, I saw the sixth grader's backpack stuffed in a blue trash can, so I grabbed it quickly before anyone could see. I just put it under my jacket and went on to my search for the Pakistani boy who got it taken away from him.

After searching every hall, peeking in every class room, I found the boy sitting in the hallway by the door of Mr. Jones' class. I walked up to him and told him that I found his backpack in the trash can. The boy looked really excited and he took the small book bag.

I asked him what his name was and how he liked the middle school and he replied, "Ahmad and you can see, Middle school isn't going perfect." I helped him off the ground and told him where I put his hat. He thanked me and started away when I called him back and asked if he wanted to sit with me and my pals at lunch tomorrow. He replied with a grin and an excited "sure!"

Lunch was great because Ahmad and I found out that we have common likes and dislikes, like loving ketchup, but hating tomatoes. We became best buddies and I made a difference in Ahmad's life. I was very proud of being a good person and helping Ahmad out. Plus, I was rewarded a great new friend to go with my pride.

What's funny is that the boy who said that my name sounded like taco, and the boy who really is nice, both have the same name. Having this great new friend has made a change to the way I handle things when I see kids getting bullied because they are different or new. Next time, I will do something to help the child who is getting picked on, and help him feel accepted.