

Best Friends Found in Unlikely Places



Luka celebrating after the Wisconsin “Best Buddies” walk.
(Spring 2015)

Many people have a story of how they “found themselves” at some point in their lives. This type of narrative is common, repetitive, and, well, somewhat annoying. On the other hand, each person tells his or her own story uniquely, for no writing style is the same. I know my experience sounds cliché, but working with those who

have cognitive disabilities completely changed the way I view the world. But my story brings a new perspective to the

benefits of volunteering. My work as a special ed aid taught me the importance of equal treatment for those who have special needs and encouraged me to pursue my passion for social justice in the professional world. My first two years of high school were tough, and though it was by no means an easy or comfortable task, working with the special needs students in my high school gave me the most memorable experience of my life because I was taught valuable lessons by some of the most incredible people I have ever met.

Stepping through the doors the first day of my freshman year, I couldn’t wait to get involved, make perfect grades, and enjoy everything that the teenage years have to offer. But by the second semester of my sophomore year, my mental health had almost completely deteriorated. It became incredibly difficult to balance school, extra-curricular activities, and the pressure of social status. Without realizing it, the things I was thrilled to experience had driven me to engage in some pretty unhealthy behaviors. Sure, from the outside it seemed I was thriving: I had a great group of friends, was captain of my ski team and was doing well academically. In reality, I was so anxious with how I was perceived by my peers that I could

barely function. The materialistic mindset I had created for myself was becoming detrimental to both my mental and physical health.

As my third year of high school came around, I was in desperate need of something fulfilling-- not another club, not another A on a math test, not another invite to a party, but something I could find true worth in. I had never been the type of person to visit the school guidance counselor, but I was having trouble finding an activity that satisfied my quest for a meaningful activity. When my counselor suggested I drop a core class and work in our school's special education room, I was shocked. Even though I had some experience with those who have cognitive disabilities, I was intimidated and reluctant to drop a class that would "buff up" my high school transcript. After weighing the pros and cons of dropping an important class, I chose to put my mental health before my academic success and devoted one hour a day to working in the special ed room. While the experience that followed was by no means easy, I am thankful for that period in my life because I would not have discovered my passion for education, the rewards of working with those who have special needs, and the importance of loving everyone for who they are regardless of their social status.

The way I felt the first time I stepped foot in room 314 is something I will never forget. My stomach was in knots and could feel sweat seeping into my shirt. I wouldn't be given a syllabus or guide for this class; it was a challenge I had never faced before. As I walked into the room with my best "it's-okay-i'm-not-freaking-out" face, I was greeted by a younger boy in a wheelchair. He smiled at me, extended his hand, and spoke a mile a minute: "Hi. I'm Andre. Are you the new student helper? Nice to meet you. It's fun here." I was flustered, so I mumbled something generic and quickly looked for someone in charge, but I couldn't seem to find a designated authority figure. This became what I loved the most about the special ed room; the

typical high school hierarchy did not exist. Sure, the teachers and aids were in charge of the students, but it never felt like that. Everyone was spread around the room during the day doing their own thing with whatever help was needed. Some students worked on writing and reading, while others played educational games on Ipads provided by the school.

During my brief tour of the room and introductions with each student, one very special person caught my eye, a freshman, named Luka, whom I had seen before when he came over to play with my brother Quinn years ago. When I was in elementary school I had seen Luka passing the soccer ball with his brother on their way home from school. It was pretty



Luka, his beloved pasta, and I during one lunch period. (Winter 2015)

apparent that Luka had some sort of cognitive disability, but my younger brother always said how funny and friendly he was. During my tour when we were introduced, Luka wasn't interested in my presence whatsoever. I couldn't take it personally. He was simply focused on the upcoming lunch hour where, without fail, he would indulge in some sort of pasta dish.

After getting oriented with the classroom during my first hour of volunteering, I was actually excited to come back the following day. Throughout the semester I was often paired with Luka for activities because we really were inseparable. I began hanging out with Luka outside of school on Sunday afternoons; we would head into the city and explore museums, see movies, and, as always, eat pasta or french fries. We even launched a craft fair and candle business in our high school's bookstore to fund our weekend expeditions. These frequent dates with my buddy became almost therapeutic because Luka expected nothing from me. He was just

there for a fun time with me, his good friend. I could be goofy when I felt like it and quiet when I wasn't feeling my best because Luka didn't care and always made me smile regardless of how I was feeling before we hung out.

Not only did Luka teach me the importance of friendship, he also influenced my decision to work professionally for social justice and equality. I really don't think I would have chosen my major if I hadn't spent so much time with my friends who have special needs. I believe people with cognitive disabilities are often overlooked in society. Many "normal" students in my high school wouldn't dare go into the "Retard Room" because difference intimidates them. Some of the most interesting, loyal and kind people I've ever met work or study in Room



Luka making fun of my backup pair of sunglasses. He prefers aviators for a 1950's, footloose aesthetic. (Spring 2014)

314. Since that semester volunteering with Luka and my other friends, I have become passionate about destigmatizing cognitive disabilities. These experiences have inspired me to pursue a career in social justice through journalism. I would not such a desire to create change without the recommendation of my guidance counselor and the support of everyone affiliated with the special ed room.

My first two years of high school were very difficult, and, though working with the special needs students in my high school was not always the easiest job it was by far the most memorable and rewarding experience of my life because I was taught valuable lessons by some of the most incredible people I have ever met. From the first day I stepped foot in Room 314 to my teary-eyed goodbye with Luka right before I headed off to college, I learned so much about

hard work, true friendship and the importance of giving everyone a chance. My special ed friends weren't considered "popular" by the majority of students, but that doesn't matter. If students are not happy and healthy individual, your place on a high school's social hierarchy is insignificant. I think it's so interesting that in Room 314 I "found myself" through my relationship Luka. Understanding what real, uninhibited friendship looks like has been the most valuable skill I have just begun to grasp. Without my friend Luka, I definitely wouldn't be in the place I am today. I would not have the empathy, compassion and drive for equality without my experiences working with my buddies with special needs. So, to Luka and the rest of the Room 314 gang, thank you.