

## ***Circle of Friends: Building Bridges on an Island***

*By: Liz Saliba, Autism Specialist, Bainbridge Island School District*

Our school district, although small comparatively, implemented several new programs, initiatives and curriculum recently. While many of these new programs focus on academics and common core standards, **we were pleased to announce that we were the very first Washington State chapter of *Circle of Friends*.**

As the school year began, there was a buzz amongst educators, parents and community members: "Tell me more about *Circle of Friends*!" We could only describe what we knew, not what we were yet to experience.

*Is it possible for meaningful friendships to develop between disabled and non-disabled peers? Is this a token friendship program? How will this look? When will it happen?*

We approached cautiously, carrying more questions than answers. Nonetheless, after our first training we moved forward and began meeting with the "friends" [students with special needs] and "peer friends" [general education students].

What I can tell you now, two trainings in and many lunch meetups in, is that **we had truly underestimated the power of compassion, the meaning of inclusion and the desire to be connected.** *Circle of Friends* has given us the opportunity for students to authentically, genuinely develop friendships.

The program looks a little different in each school building because of the age of the students, but the core of the program is consistent, students coming together and creating meaning.

While I have participated and observed so many of the lunch meetings, group gatherings and themed celebrations, **there is never a moment that I do not catch my breath.** I've heard that it's not the measure of how many breaths you take in life, but rather how many times you're rendered breathless.

A moment that will carry me through this lifetime...

In an elementary building, an SLP and I co-facilitate a social/emotional group for students with autism. We were meeting during a lunch period in order to accommodate for the students' varied schedules, and we decided to use this time for *Circle of Friends*, inviting "peer friends" to our meeting. This was a significant change for our "friends".

(CONTINUED)

The very first meeting, we came together as a large group for the purpose of introductions and playing games that facilitated, "*What do we have in common?*" All the students participated and enjoyed learning about features in which they share. **At the end of the group, we had one student with special needs who was sad to have it come to an end.** We got out a calendar and showed him the next meeting date; he perked up and counted how many days in between. **(This student, to this day, counts down until his next *Circle of Friends* meetup.)** The SLP and I turned to one another so excited, so thrilled at the success of the meeting.

As we were revisiting the event, another one of our "friends" re-entered the room. This student is **a fourth-grade student with Asperger's.** He **walked up to us and said, "I really liked lunch today. For the first time I feel normal."** He turned and walked away; his life had changed forever in this moment and so had ours.

Breathless...