

IN THE SPOTLIGHT...

The PAIRS program

Article Submitted by Rich Marooney

This past school year, I had the true privilege to be a part of the new-founded PAIRS Program at GCHS. What makes this program so incredible is that I'm not sure who gets the greater benefit, the special ed students or the volunteers interacting with these students? My experience in the PAIRS Program was hands down the best part of my junior year. Through my experience, I discovered what a true gift the world has in these special ed students. No matter what, every day of the week I was greeted with a smile or a high-five or just a general group of people that were genuinely happy to see me. These small every day actions are sadly some of the most unappreciated in this modern world. In days that I struggled, whether I let a bad test grade keep me down, maybe I got caught up in some typical high school drama, or days in which as a high school student life really had me down, I was always greeted with a huge smile by one specific special ed student with a request to play Jenga. I realized in those days what a beautiful gift these students were to me. They didn't care that I didn't do well on a test, nor did they care that I played poorly in my baseball game the day before. All of this (which sadly as a junior in high school I let define me) was completely irrelevant to these students who were excited to see me because of who I am. It reminded me that I'm more than a student, I'm more than an athlete, and despite the disabilities that these students live with every day, they were still smiling. They perhaps are the happiest people in the school! I always felt that there was such a powerful message in that and I consider myself extremely fortunate to have been able to interact and become friends with such beautiful human beings as the special ed students are.

On the flip side, I really feel that the PAIRS Program was just as beneficial for the special ed students as it was for me. It was really encouraging to see the giant leaps that were made by some of the special ed students from the beginning of the program to the end of the year. Some students were definitely more amicable than others, but it was the students that were more shy than others that really made great leaps. I remember so vividly playing Uno with a group of students and one special ed student who usually kept her distance all on her own got up from where she was sitting to come sit with where the group was. The club advisor Ms. Cloghessy told me afterwards that it was the first time that particular student had done anything like that in the few years she had attended GCHS. Furthermore, it was incredible to see the amount of other high school students who saw us playing games with the special ed students and wanted to get involved. The number of volunteers grew rapidly, and special ed students were able to meet and make connections with a variety of high school students. The surplus of volunteers was a huge benefit to the program because if some students had other obligations to attend to at lunch, there was always someone else able to step in. There was never a day since the start of the program that the special ed students were alone. Everyday the interactions between special ed and high school students brought just pure happiness to everyone involved. It was a true blessing to be able to see this program gradually grow. The PAIRS Program is an extremely unique and special development to GCHS and I hope it continues to have the same success it did in its first full year this year.