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Appleton North students find support and companionship in F.A.N. Club

Meghan Diemel Published 11:06 p.m. CT Dec. 18, 2014



(Photo: Graham Washatka/For Post-Crescent Media)

“It came without ribbons! It came without tags!

“It came without packages, boxes or bags!”

— Dr. Seuss’ *“How the Grinch Stole Christmas!”*

Theodor Seuss Geisel’s words and the holiday spirit it provokes are a reminder that the best gifts we can give one another — kindness, empathy and friendship — are not items you find at 4 a.m. on Black Friday.

These are the gifts students in Appleton North High School’s Friends At North (F.A.N.) Club have been exchanging throughout the year in an effort to make high school a positive experience for all.

“It’s a club that provides opportunities for special-ed students to attend extracurricular activities like sporting events, plays, game days and social activities with their peers,” said Kathy Devereaux, the club’s adviser and Appleton North teacher. “Otherwise in the past, they’ve attended with their parents because they can’t attend by themselves.”

The club started in 2012 by way of Devereaux’s life skills class during which students teach lessons about communication and daily living skills, hygiene and social interactions to special-education students.

“A student in that class, Meg Crowley, was a neighbor to one of her special-ed peers, and the family had asked her if she could take him with her to some events,” Devereaux said. “So together we started this club with about 10 students.”

In its second year, the club expanded to more than 35 students. Now, 53 kids, including eight special-education students, regularly participate.

“I think it makes a huge impact to be part of the high school culture, to the social experience, to be able to do things with all peers,” Devereaux said. “Traditionally, there are great programs for people with special needs, but most of those activities are with other special-needs students. With F.A.N. Club, they’re just like everybody else. They’re cheering on the basketball team or the football team or they’re attending the play as part of the audience instead of in a supported situation.”

Steven Brennan’s son, Bob, 18, is a member of the club. Brennan said one of his concerns for Bob, who has autism, is that he was missing out on the activities and friendships that form outside of school hours.

“He and I would go to football games and go to basketball games, but he was sitting in the parents’ section with me. Just a section over, there were all of these kids in the students’ section yelling and hollering and having a good time; he had to miss out on all that.”

When Devereaux came to him and other parents about starting the F.A.N. Club, it was welcomed with exuberance, Brennan said.

“I thought, this is heaven,” he said. “It’s something we’ve been waiting for, for the longest time. Now as part of the F.A.N. Club, he can sit in the student section and cheer, and when the band plays, he gets up and sings. This club has allowed him to gain the whole high school experience like any other regular kid has the opportunity. It just made a big difference in his life. It has been amazing.”

It's not just life changing for students like Bob Brennan. Sophomore Bella Krajnik joined the club because she thought it would be a good way to meet new people.

"I thought this club would be a good idea because it's a bunch of different people," Bella said. "There's someone for everyone to be friends with."

What she soon realized, however, was the club was making her a more considerate person.

"It makes me more aware of different people and how to communicate," Bella said. "You have to figure out different ways of communication between yourself and all the different kids. It makes you more aware of your surroundings and helps you communicate better."

Along with Bella, sophomore Emma Knutson is another one of the club's student leaders. She helped the group get better organized this school year after many of last year's student participants graduated.

"I originally got involved because over the years I personally have become very close with some special-education kids," Emma said. "I just thought it was a very cool program."

"It makes me so much more aware of people around me, and these kids have so many different needs that it made me more compassionate. It really makes my day when one of the special-ed students texts me about what's going on in their life and when they feel comfortable to contact me outside of the club."

Brennan said the large smiles from his son, Bob, during club events have helped ease his mind.

"It is the neatest thing for me as a dad to see that," he said. "I myself like going to football games and basketball games, and knowing he's in the student section yelling and hollering and getting up and cheering ... it literally almost brings a tear to my face knowing he's enjoying himself and just being a regular kid."

"You know, we're just basically like a big group of friends," Bella said. "Our abilities don't matter. We want to create opportunities for all kids to have a normal high school experience, and I think that's what we've achieved this year. We see each other in the hall and we stop and talk, we laugh and smile, we have so much fun. That's what I love about it — we carry these friendships outside the club."

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