

To be Involved

Walking down the hallway, I overheard my peers giggle after carelessly lacing their sentences with the “R” word. In my algebra class, I sat in silence as my classmates whispered slurs in conversation about other students. Even when discussing with friends, I took to heart their usage of derogatory phrases—“God, you are just so *slow*”—to tease mindless mistakes.

In a world clouded by moral haze and indefinite “gray areas,” I realized that discrimination was a black-and-white issue. By using hateful language as effortlessly as an exhale, you are the problem. By taking no action against it, you are enabling the problem; therefore, you are the problem, too. You are only doing right if you speak out. I did not want to be one who enabled immorality; I now wanted to be one to speak up.

As a middle school journalist, I wrote an article highlighting the efforts my school made to construct an autism-inclusive environment. Expanding from there, as a freshman, I published an article reviewing the amendments to the Pennsylvania Public School Code, which added the inclusion of disability history into the curriculum. The following month, I documented the disABILITY event, hosted by my school’s Life Skills class, that provided physically-able students the opportunity to complete tasks in the shoes of a disabled person.

Since then, I have written and published numerous articles in my school newspaper to amplify disability awareness. I reported on how Pennsylvania school funding insecurity directly harmed small school districts, like my own, and limited accessibility for disabled students. I wrote an article on behalf of the newspaper’s Editorial Board detailing how poverty disproportionately affects the disabled community. At the beginning of my junior year, I traveled to Philadelphia with other student journalists to earn a certificate in Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion, where I learned about the lack of reporting done for the neurodivergent and physically disabled.

Beyond the walls of my journalism class, I took action as a student leader. As Class Vice President, I advocated strongly for benches to be added outside of the cafeteria, in a space students identify as the student center. I did this so my overwhelmed peers had a quiet escape from the lunchroom chaos.

Outside of classrooms, I pursued my efforts. I volunteered at the Gingerbread Man “Run For Autism” in Pittsburgh and stood beside my mother at booths in the blistering heat and crowded convention spaces to educate my community on neurodivergence. I learned to speak up when I heard insensitive gossip, and encouraged sensible language instead.

When I return home from school, I am greeted by the loving smiles of my mother and sister, both of whom are autistic. And through their love, I understand the harm in enabling my peers to use hateful language.

Being involved in your community comes with the responsibility of being inclusive, and I hope my involvement made me the advocate my loved ones deserve.