



Peer Mentoring Opens Windows of Understanding

By Meghan Rogers

In high school I took a peer mentoring course that strongly impacted my life. Through this simple but powerful program I developed friendships with wonderful peers whom I probably wouldn't otherwise have had the opportunity to come to know. Some of my new friends were people who had been diagnosed with autism and various learning disabilities. As part of my duties in their classrooms I helped with the training for the high school Special Olympics. I also helped my peers one-on-one with their school work and I shared fun moments of play with them. The more I got to know these students the more I came to understand how separate their high school experience was from that of other students. I learned that they were sometimes called names, laughed at, often misunderstood and worst of all – ignored.

Through this course I earned more than a credit. It brought me to my calling of working alongside people with intellectual disabilities. I did this in an L'Arche day program for 6 years and then became an Educational Assistant in the Toronto Catholic board. My work has brought home the reality that life isn't easy for many people, but it also helped me to experience the values of trust, acceptance and friendship that come with sharing relationships with people who have intellectual disabilities. I find myself more accepting of myself and more conscious of living life day by day.

The transition from L'Arche to being an Educational Assistant at Marshall McLuhan Catholic Secondary School wasn't as easy as I thought it would be. I went from a world of learning and speaking the language of the heart to a world where logic and higher grades of academic achievement were emphasized. After a few years as an EA, I talked with my father who works for the same Board about the idea of starting a peer mentoring course similar to the one that had such a profound impact on my life. His suggestion was to pilot it at Marshall McLuhan first.

I shared my idea with the head of Special Education and with a teacher who taught the Leadership course. Soon the Leadership students were in the Life Skills classrooms where they and the Life Skills students became mentors for each other. Seeing these relationships in the classrooms develop was beautiful, but seeing the relationships carry



over in the hallways and the cafeteria (the rooms without the adults/educators setting up the relationships) was extraordinary! Handshakes, props, high fives, conversations, laughter and smiles--students sharing simple moments of joy. I believe as an educator it is my duty to create a learning environment for students that is safe, supportive, and educational but also an environment where students with differing abilities can share their gifts with one another and grow into understanding adults.

