

Features

Breaking educational barriers

By **Julia Knebl**
Managing Editor

St. Joseph High School is a great place. The SJHS we all know and love envelops a plethora of classes to satisfy our every curious whim. We are challenged, but we are empowered through the knowledge we gain from those challenges. However, for the students with Autism Spectrum Disorders in Mr. Matt Rapette's special education class, St. Joseph High School rarely extends beyond the walls of their classroom.

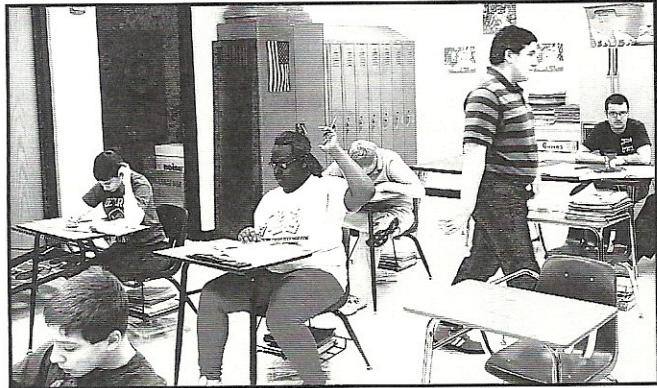
However, Mr. Rapette also plays host to 14 students who participate in the Peer-to-Peer program.

Peer-to-Peer is an elective class in which students help bridge the gap and fill the role of friends and guides, which in turn gives Mr. Rapette's students the opportunity to participate in general education classes. Due to the nature of the disorder that they live with, Mr. Rapette's students would otherwise not have the chance to experi-

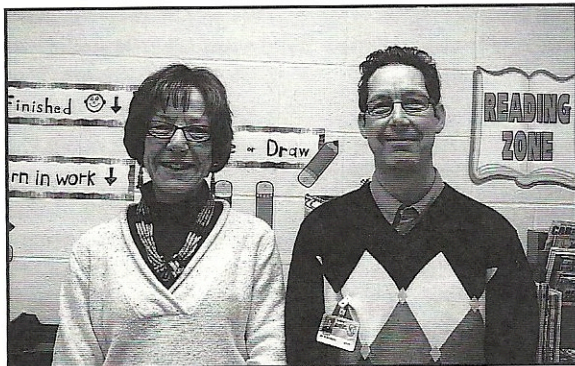
ence that particular facet of the typical high school adventure.

"[The Peer-to-Peer program] is a really great thing, because it enables all of the kids involved to help each other out, and gives them a chance to see things through a different perspective," said Mr. Rapette.

Autism Spectrum Disorders is the umbrella name for Asperger's syndrome, Rett's syndrome, unspecified pervasive developmental disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder, and Autism. ASDs are developmental disorders that affect the brain's social and communication center, as well as sensory perception. ASD is usually diagnosed



Both Julia Knebl



within the first three years of life. Nobody knows exactly what causes ASD yet, but research is ongoing.

"When I was involved with a [Peer-to-Peer like] program in high school, much less was known about Autism. They didn't have special education classes available, so kids diagnosed with ASD were often mainstreamed, with the hope that they'd somehow make it through," said Mrs. Jeri Murphy, a special education teaching assistant here at SJHS.

Since ASD affects a person's social and communication abilities, those diagnosed with ASD may need a little extra help figuring out the social cues and customs that others may pick up without even noticing. In addition, since people diagnosed with ASD oftentimes have trouble adjusting to irregular routines—for example, a class that is usually a lecture, but goes to the lab occasionally—having a guide of sorts can help smooth out the bumps by acting as a buffer.

This is where the students in Peer-to-Peer come in. In its fourth year at SJHS, Peer-to-Peer has grown from four students to more than fourteen. Its benefits encompass all of the students involved. For those diagnosed with ASD, learning social skills and an increased level of independence, and for the Peer-to-Peer helpers, the knowledge that you've helped change a life in ways bigger than what you might initially realize. In addition, the program is a great way to get hands-on experience in a number of professions.

"[Peer-to-Peer] has really helped me realize that I want to be involved in special education. . . I definitely think that [the program] helps out the students," said senior Skye Baker.

In addition to helping Mr. Rapette's students attend classes, Skye and the 13 other Peer-to-Peer helpers assist Mr. Rapette and Mrs. Murphy in the classroom.

There is an application process for being permitted to sign up for Peer-to-Peer. If interested, see your guidance counselor.



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