

Be Here Now- Live the Importance of Today  
(Essay submitted for the Shawn Silvera Memorial Scholarship)  
By Anthony Pasquale

My first day of first grade rattled me. A student severely handicapped had bumped into me and had a breakdown. At that moment I had no idea that was going on, but it made me curious. My curiosity led me to join the “Gateway” program at my elementary school. The program puts mainstreamed education students into the special needs program to create relationships to help both students succeed. I was partnered with a male student (we’ll call him Matt) who was an epileptic and was non-verbal. I had no idea what to say, let alone do.

Over the years I became more involved with the program. From sixth grade through twelfth grade, I was a Teaching Assist in the classroom. I was able to stay connected with the same student throughout each of our educational careers. Seeing his progress was the motivation that kept me in school. There were days that I wanted to give up on school, but knowing that he wouldn’t have another mentor kept me there.

Matt had been communicating at a low level using a box that had verbal commands he could control with a button activated by his elbow. As technology improved, his communication ability was able to as well. We got to the point where instead of being limited to pre-programmed queues, we could add out our own. Matt asked me to be his voice. I had never felt more respected in my life (needless to say, I sobbed). From that day forward Matt had a human voice, not just a computer generated one.

The weekend of the school dance Matt asked me to come to one of his floor hockey games. I already had a date for the dance, but told him that I would make it if he promised to score a goal. My date was less than thrilled by the idea, but I convinced her that the hockey game was more important anyways. When Matt saw not only me there, but that I had brought a friend too he burst in to his famous laugh. Matt’s team won the game 2-0.

On an especially tough date for me, Matt was trying out a power wheelchair that he could operate on his own for the first time. I remember him giving me his “chicken face” (an expression of pure frustration, that asked how much longer?), then all of the sudden BURST into laughter as the wheelchair raced down the hall towards me. He swung out his arm and gave me a high-five. That may not seem like a huge deal to anyone else, but to me it was the coolest thing. Matt, who had always relied on someone to push his wheelchair, just “walked” himself over to me and gave me a high-five.

While you may be asking yourself, what does this have to do with living for the importance of today? I’ll tell you I had to learn a very humbling lesson. I found out Graduation Day that while I was moving on to pursue my dreams for being a police officer, that Matt was in declining health and probably didn’t have much longer. My heart sank. This kid who was basically my brother may be gone tomorrow. My life took a turn. While I was still planning on pursuing law enforcement, I had a completely different attitude. I needed to stop taking life for granted and enjoy the gift of everyday. I started to realize that everyday had a preset for me, some big some rather small. This new appreciation of life made me a stronger person, and a better leader. I achieved the rank of Captain with my Explorer Post, and was now affecting the lives of not just one individual but several. I was set on bettering the community we served, and helping the Explorers under me achieve their full potential.

I am happy to say that “Matt” is still around and doing well, and I am humbled to say that he has made me the appreciative leader that I am today.

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