

Messiah College & West Shore School District Partner to Expand Educational Opportunity

A partnership program with a local school district has enabled a group of Messiah College students to develop a friendship that spans the perceived barrier of ability. The partnership began last year when Gretchen Devine's aunt approached the Office of Disability Services and the Teacher Education Program with the goal of expanding Gretchen's educational experiences to include a college setting. Gretchen had dreamed of attending Messiah College, but her developmental disability disqualified her from standard enrollment. This spring, however, that dream became a reality when the partnership was developed to allow Gretchen to participate in some campus activities, including attending classes, with the assistance of volunteer mentors. The goal of the Pilot program is not merely to create a hierarchical mentoring relationship but to be a platform for the formation of unexpected friendships.



As a student who was unfamiliar with the program, I met up with the young women as they enjoyed lunch on a Monday afternoon. Carolyn Partridge, Meghan Compton and Olivia King are junior elementary with special education certification majors at Messiah College. They are three of the six students who have become both friends and mentors of Gretchen Devine. They meet for lunch every Monday and Wednesday, a time Meghan describes as their 'time of friendship'. I found the group seated at their favorite table chatting about the day's events.

"We have really good, funny times", said Gretchen. "I liked the honesty that they had, honesty among friends is very important." Carolyn and Gretchen will attend a Language Development class together immediately after lunch.

Carolyn says she enjoys seeing Gretchen interact in class. Gretchen will often greet classmates and make conversation with them to see how they are doing. She is eager to participate in class, raising her hand to ask a question or clarify a point that she may not understand. "Gretchen loves learning with Don Murk [Dr. Donald A. Murk, Professor of Early Childhood Education]; he tells a lot of stories that she can easily remember and that make her laugh. What I love most about attending class with [Gretchen] is seeing her eagerness and joy for learning."

Since the program kickoff, the number of mentors involved has increased from three to six. Administrators plan for the successful partnership to continue into the fall of 2011.

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