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Project Empathy: opening young minds

By *Sophie Braccini*



JM students participate in Project Empathy.
Photo Sophie Braccini

In the Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School large gym on March 16, sixth-graders with blindfolds over their eyes sat divided into seven groups, each led by two or three eighth-graders. One group clumsily try to spread jam, mustard or ketchup on a piece of bread. Another group attempted to navigate a small obstacle course with the help of a cane. A third group struggled to pour liquid in cups of different sizes without spilling, while a fourth group tried to put on clothes with their eyes shut.

The idea to teach these sixth-graders what it might feel like to be visually impaired came from Campolindo High School junior Audrey Moore, who started her search for heightened empathy when she was just 13.

Three summers ago, Moore was a precocious and inventive teen who was bored. Her mother asked her to do something productive with her time, so she decided to invent her own camp, creating a series of experiences, living the lives of people very different from herself. One example was when she confined herself to a wheelchair

for a few days. Her cousin sometimes pushed her when she went downtown, and Moore remembered how shocked she was when people addressed her cousin, instead of talking to Moore directly. She remembered how she felt somewhat invisible, and that it had a profound impact on her.

The next summer she designed a camp for younger kids to experience what it was like to live a much less privileged life. They had to live on a few dollars a day, collect and sell refuse, and live for a day with very little water.

This year Moore created an entire empathy experience for middle school students as part of the Campolindo Interact Club.

Moore worked with her club's classmates to design experiments for the 27 eighth-grade leadership class students. The idea was to train them first, and then have them meet with all the JM sixth-graders and have them experience some of the challenges faced by blind people.

Moore explained that the blindfolding part of the activity helped develop empathy for a person adjusting to a visual impairment. It was followed by a discussion with station leaders emphasizing the capabilities of the blind and how they adapted to their situation. The JM eighth-graders created their own experiments for the sixth-graders and conducted the discussion groups afterward.

Moore's objective was not to have the students pity visually impaired people, but to open the doors of empathy in their hearts and minds. While the stations did focus solely on the blind, Moore believes that empathy, once developed, is not limited to just one group of people. She thinks that when we become aware of the lives and feelings of others, our empathy grows.

Her experience inspired her to show empathy toward others, and to spread empathy to even more people until it reaches a critical mass, creating a positive impact and spreading compassion. She hopes other Interact students will continue this new program after she goes on to college, and adds that she and her classmates could expand the program to other middle schools in the area.

Moore says that she grew up with the message of understanding in her family, but that it was only when she started her experiments that those messages became her reality.

Moore, who has always been attracted to studying the sciences, is thinking of studying neuroscience and exploring how empathy happens and impacts the brain. She says that now is the perfect time for more empathy; it's something that the world needs.

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