



Overcoming Bullying

We conducted a Q&A with Elizabeth Hedenberg, a Circle of Friends Advisory Board Member representing the special needs community. Elizabeth shared with our Associate Director, Tamra Mariott, her experience of being bullied as a student with disabilities, and how she overcame this challenge to go on to lead a happy and fulfilling life.

Tamra: Please tell me a little about yourself, your family, hobbies, and work.

Elizabeth: I work at Goodwill on Santa Monica Blvd., and I've worked there for over 10 years. I absolutely love it!... I am very independent. I take the bus there, and I take the bus home. I have a very lovable family: my mom Deborah, my dad Andrew and my younger brother Michael. They have been very supportive, even growing up, [they were] very supportive. I am officially married to my husband [Doug] and he has been very supportive of me...also just being there for me, and also helping me with cooking healthy. I'm becoming quite the chef!

Tamra: Thank you for sharing about yourself. Elizabeth, can you share with us why you decided to join the Advisory Board of Circle of Friends?

Elizabeth: I also had some personal reasons why I wanted to join. I had to put up with all kinds of classmates. I had to put up with a lot of bullying, a lot of teasing, for many different reasons. Because I was very much overweight, I got teased a lot, and because of my Down syndrome. So, I do know how that feels when other kids get bullied. And, of course, I saw that too because I work with kids... I work with one particular little girl with Down syndrome. I helped her to join up with other little kids, because we kind of isolate ourselves a lot because we're afraid what might happen. We're afraid to make friends. We're afraid of who might tease me, who's gonna make fun of me... So, I'm a big advocate for helping kids, working with kids and also with teachers to help them to understand how to work with kids, especially kids with disabilities.

Tamra: That's really wonderful that you're turning around and helping other kids that, like you said, might have some of the same challenges like being bullied. How do you think that bullying shaped the person you are today?

Elizabeth: For one thing, I stopped taking things so personally, that's something that even little kids do, too. A lot of time you take it so personally, and a lot of time it comes out in your behavior. I remember a long time ago, I would burst out crying and now as an adult I don't do that so much... For example, my job coach, I don't always get along with her. But I talk to her, I don't run away from her... I deal with the person and I say, "You know what you're doing is really bothering me and it's not ok," and if they don't want to hear it, tough! They're going to hear it.

Tamra: So if someone is being bullied, where should they go for help?

Elizabeth: Teachers, also their friends, and also parents and people they can talk to and people that can actually stand up for them... Even going into the principal's office and telling them what's going on...

Tamra: Last question: How do you think we can stop bullying in schools?

Elizabeth: I also I learned to stand up for myself. That's something even kids without disability need to learn -- how to stand your ground and how to stand up for yourself. Because parents and teachers can help, but you need to do it yourself. You need to say, "That's not ok, and it's not ok to do this, and I don't need to put up with it." Education, learning, saying something right when it's happening.

Tamra: Right, so confronting it when it's happening, right away. Thank you, you've shared so many great things. I'm really proud of you for how much you've learned from your experiences. You've gone through some really hard things, Elizabeth, but it sounds like you've learned a lot, that you're a great advocate and encourager to anyone else going through it.