

National program empowers students

Project Eye-to-Eye pairs special ed high school mentors with younger students

By CARLY ROMAN

There were three distinct tables, each an unlikely mix of high school students and young children, at the Betty Taubert Girl Scout House Sunday, Jan. 8. After about five minutes of chatting, the participants in the nationally renowned Project Eye-to-Eye, or PETE, were hushed as one of the program's student co-coordinators, Emma Colbran, began to speak. Colbran explained what the activity of the day would be: collages made from tracing profiles of the children and then combining them with words and images that they thought described themselves. The group meets each Sunday for 16 weeks, with different projects at each meeting, and pairs high school special education students with younger students experiencing similar disabilities.

Colbran's involvement in the program began last year when her learning resource teacher, Jonathan Feld, asked her to speak to a group of fourth- and fifth-graders at Greenacres Elementary School about her experience with learning disabilities. In the crowd was Lisa Lawless, the mother of a seventh-grader with learning disabilities. Lawless is an active member in the Scarsdale chapter of PETE.

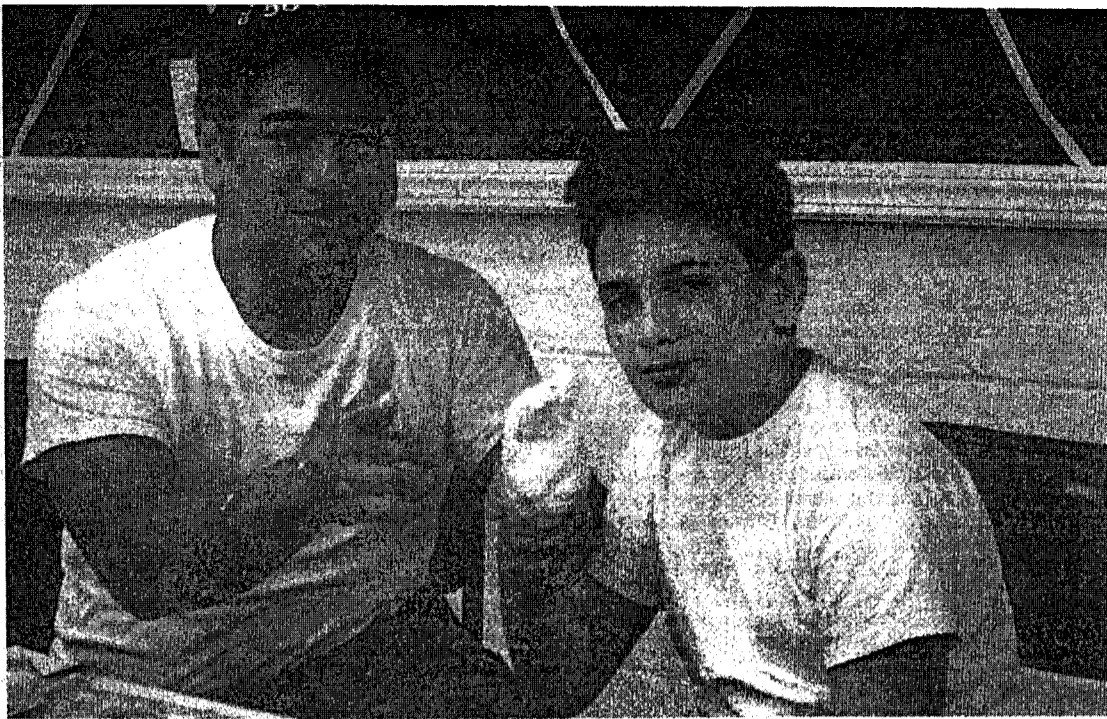
"It's a program that Greenacres does every year where they have older high school kids with learning disabilities talk to a whole grade at a time," said Lawless. "So I went because my daughter used to go to Greenacres, and it's always very impressive to hear these high school kids because they've been in the elementary schoolers' position."

Unbeknownst to Colbran, PETE founder David Flink was also at the meeting and attentively listening to what she said. "My involvement in the program is actually a huge coincidence," Colbran said. "I was so excited when Mr. Flink contacted me. I immediately wanted to get involved!"

When given the task of choosing a co-coordinator, Colbran did not hesitate to contact her best friend, Zach Galst. "The chance to help students with disabilities was something I could not turn down, and I told her yes right away," said Galst.

Once the co-coordinators were established, Colbran and Galst needed to undergo a training regimen. They traveled to Brown University, which also has a PETE chapter, and attended a four-day-long workshop in order to prepare themselves for all of the obstacles they were about to face. "While we were there, we learned how to run an art workshop effectively and how we should handle talking to the kids about their struggles," Galst explained of his trip to Brown.

Colbran's sentiments mirrored Galst's, referring to her time at Brown as "fun" and "inspirational." Galst and Colbran next needed to make some executive decisions about how the program would



LIZZIE RUBIN PHOTOS

Joey Magsambol and Mikhayl Abrahams, above, and Samantha Lawless, below, at a Sunday meeting.



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— SHS JUNIOR MELISSA RIFKIN

run. They decided to hold their meetings at the Girl Scout House on Wayside Lane each Sunday, at no cost to the program's participants.

"The Girl Scout House seemed like a good location," said Galst. "We had conflicts because of schoolwork, so we had to work on the weekends. We offer the program through the Scarsdale Recreation Department, and the rec offered up the Girl Scout House, which seemed like a very good place."

With the program almost ready to be opened to the public, the two juniors were left with the hefty task of spreading the word about their program. "The most challenging aspect of being a coordinator for me was the initial set-up phase," said Colbran. "We had to advertise and get the word out about the program in order to recruit the children and mentors." Through their synergistic effort, Galst and Colbran inducted 12 high school mentors and 12 mentees in grades 5 through 7 for the new PETE Scarsdale chapter. The program has received numerous accolades from its high school students. Scarsdale High School junior

Melissa Rifkin, a mentor who intends to rejoin the program next year, praised Galst and Colbran for creating an atmosphere that allowed the children to temporarily forget about their learning disabilities. "It's just a good way for kids to become friends with one another and just do something fun and not really worry about 'Am I going to get this wrong?'" said Rifkin.

Galst and Colbran's next step was to pair the high schoolers with the young students. "The first day we had everyone talk together and got a feel for each kid's personality and a mentor with whom we thought he or she would work well.

"Like if a kid was really into sports, and we knew we had one mentor who was really athletic, we would pair them," Galst said. Rifkin was very pleased with her young buddy, Eliza, whom she described as someone who loves "singing and acting and animals," and is "a really good match."

Rifkin stated that she felt free to be herself in an environment in which her

joined the Scarsdale chapter of PETE. "One thing I noticed is that my daughter happens to be very reluctant to let me take her to after-school clubs. I think that part of this is because of her learning disability, and so her reaction to me is usually, 'I don't want to do that today,'" said Lawless. "With Project Eye-to-Eye, the first day I brought her there, she came running out with a huge smile on her face and told me how she didn't want to leave. She even asked me during the week, 'When are we going back to Project Eye-to-Eye?'"

Marcus Soutra, the managing director of Project Eye-to-Eye, said the program has received positive reviews on a national level. "PETE has received excellent feedback. We have professional studies coming out of Columbia University which show that Project Eye-to-Eye is increasing self-esteem, self-advocacy skills, and an understanding of their learning disabilities," said Soutra.

Project Eye-to-Eye's evaluation results bolster Soutra's claims. Eighty-eight percent of students reported that they "felt better about themselves" as a result of their involvement in PETE, while 77 percent have demonstrated improved self-advocacy. These results came as no surprise to Rifkin, who liked each aspect of the program.

"I just genuinely love going to the program," said Rifkin. Since the program began, some members have gotten even more involved with PETE. A few weeks ago, Galst, along with four other members of PETE, attended a meeting in Washington, D.C., with Secretary of Education Arne Duncan.

"That was probably the coolest thing I've ever done, especially knowing that Secretary Duncan knew my opinion and valued it," said Galst of the meeting. "He and his staff talked to us about the goals for education in the future and what we could do to help learning-disabled kids."

After the meeting, Duncan sent Galst a letter saying that Galst had "helped make the atmosphere and energy in the room vibrant," and that he admired Galst's "passion and dedication to accomplishing his educational goals."

Project Eye-to-Eye is a rapidly expanding program. Next year's goal is to have 20 mentors and 20 mentees. Parents or students who would like to join Project Eye-to-Eye for the 2012-13 school year are asked to contact Colbran at errox@aim.com or Galst at zgalst@verizon.net.

disabilities did not put her at a disadvantage. "You get to know other kids — even kids my age or older in the high school who have similar learning disabilities," she said. "You just talk about your learning disabilities and how people shouldn't be ashamed of having them. It's a special thing to have."

Like Colbran and Galst, the high school mentors needed to go through a training process before the program began. "We had a whole list of scenarios, like what would happen if a kid wasn't behaving, and we talked about our projects and what our goals really were with the kids," recalled Rifkin. "On the first day of training, we had to do our own little art projects and show them what we went through. We did what we had to do," Rifkin said.

Seventh-grader Samantha Lawless applauded PETE for its efforts, saying that she enjoyed "all the cool art projects." Her only criticism was that she wished the program allowed for the participants to "play more games together."

Lisa Lawless said that she noted positive changes in her daughter once she