

I've learned a lot of valuable stuff over the past 2 years. I've learned how to drive and how to sound professional on the phone. I've decided without a doubt where I'm going to college and what I want to major in. I've learned how to garden with a coldframe, how to throw a football, and how to be a kid again. I've learned more than half of this stuff from my volunteer sites, and I have more to thank them for than I can fit into a 5 minute speech. But I guess the biggest thing I've learned is the power of my own voice.

When I was placed in Ms. Martin's special ed classroom, I didn't know what I was doing. It was a completely new experience for me, and on top of it, I was so shy that I hardly said a thing all year. Whenever I did speak, it was quietly enough that only the person I was talking to could hear me. Despite my crippling social ineptitude, the kids were amazing. There was Trista, who would crawl onto my lap and hug me to get out of doing work, Kaidan, who indignantly corrects anyone who calls me Haley instead of Halle, and Jake, who takes great delight in watching you follow him down the slide. Every day someone would do something to surprise me or make me laugh, and 3rd block at Ms. Martin's became my favorite part of the day. And while I often get annoyed with kids, the ones in that classroom seem to be of a higher caliber, because I never lose my patience there. Volunteering there made me consider minoring in special education, which I'd never even thought could be an option for me before.

Now that it's my senior year, I've continued volunteering in Ms. Martin's, and for PSL, I've taken up 4 hours a week at the vocational center, where I volunteer with about 15 students roughly my age. The vocational center is decidedly more hectic than Ms. Martin's room- we go to gym, we cook, we do arts and crafts and messy science experiments. The students there have taught me how to play volleyball and do not get mad at me when I suck at it. I've also sort of become friends with the teachers and job coaches.

But the thing is, I'm not seen as another teacher there, I'm seen as a peer. So if one of the students there is misbehaving, or having girl problems, or just having a crappy day, sometimes my insight will count where a teacher's doesn't. Which makes me helpful to the teachers in a way that's unique, as long as I'm able to do it. It's a situation where, for the first time ever, talking has actually helped me more than hurt me. I've carried it over to other situations where I was too shy to talk, and it's been indefinitely helpful.

Another person who taught me a lot about the importance of a voice was Diane Swatowski. Dianne is an accountant at St. Mary's, and she's pretty smart with some impressive degrees. But once she was out of college, it took her forever to find a job. Diane has cerebral palsy, and while it obviously didn't affect her brain, she had some issues with her limbs, and for the first few minutes of speaking to her, she's a little hard to understand. Prospective bosses would hear her voice on the phone and lose interest, or they'd get all weird about shaking her hand. To better put it into perspective for us, Diane had us stuff marshmallows in our mouths and had us read aloud. Despite being smarter than most of us, and hilarious on top of it, Diane could not find a job. And it was partly because people would judge her voice.

My volunteer work has helped me realize that I want to major in Special education, and has helped me gain the confidence to say what I'm thinking. I've had so many awesome, sad, funny

moments there, and I've made friends that I will remember forever. And as my senior year ends, I am quickly approaching my least favorite part of speaking- the goodbyes.