

# HLHS students learning about each other in new LINK class

By Cheryl Holladay

An innovative class at Houghton Lake High School is bringing different types of students together in a new way.

The LINK class brings general education students and special education students together in a peer-to-peer format.

The class was suggested by teachers Jeannette Murphy, Angie Dalak and Maureen Ruddy, following a START (Statewide Autism Resources and Training) conference last year at the Ralph A. MacMullan Conference Center at Higgins Lake.

The LINK program was created in 1990 at Clarkston Community Schools under the direction of Maureen Ziegler, who was a teacher consultant for the district. Later, Ziegler joined START, which has implemented the LINK program in other schools and provides training for staff and administrators in more than 400 schools throughout Michigan.

Featuring a book by author and runner Tracey Cohen, "Six Word Lessons on Asperger Syndrome: 100 Lessons to Understand and Support Girls and Women with Asperger's," Houghton Lake's LINK class benefits both general education and special education students.

"It's just so practical," Ruddy said of the book, adding that the class is applying it and "having meaningful discussions."

Cohen, who lives in Farmington Hills, was invited to visit the class and did so Oct. 9.

## Personal toll

Having attended the University of Michigan, Cohen became a physical education teacher and spent 10 years in the Peace Corps. However, she said she was not diagnosed with autism until she was 39 years old.

Working with a family whose child has Asperger's Syndrome, she had attended a conference in which her symptoms were being described.

"I just started bawling," she said, adding it is emotional when "someone starts describing your life."

Cohen was never one to make excuses, she said, even though she had "emotional delays" and "processing delays." Knowing her situation made her realize why she has trouble with everyday conversation and social interactions.

She said her pet peeve is when someone is called "stupid" because there are so many types of intelligence.

"I never knew what I was dealing with," she said, adding she was called "dumb." "You name it - I was called it."

An accomplished runner, Cohen felt comfortable talking with the LINK students about running a 100-mile marathon, something she had not planned as a goal.

"Life is funny," she said, adding that



## AUTHOR VISIT

Tracey Cohen of Farmington Hills, author of "Six Word Lessons on Asperger Syndrome: 100 Lessons to Understand and Support Girls and Women with Asperger's," talks with Houghton Lake High School senior Ricky Juillerat while visiting the new LINK class. (CHP)

things change when you don't intend them to. "Never say never."

She said being on her high school's track and cross country teams helped her fit in.

For two years, however, she was institutionalized, but not because of autism.

"I was a 'bad kid,'" she said. "They didn't know what to do with me."

She went into the institution and came back out still undiagnosed, she said, but she learned about running while there, "So that was a good thing."

Knowing what she was dealing with "would've made all the difference in the world," she said, especially with family interactions. Now 44, she is on good terms with her family.

Having Cohen visit the class augmented what the students have been doing online.

The general education students have been taking part in online discussions with Cohen. As independent study students, they must check in frequently to offer responses. Students receive points for responding and for commenting on others' posts.

"Their responses are phenomenal," Ruddy said.

A topic is covered each week from Cohen's book, Ruddy said, adding that they will use her book next semester, but will add "There's a Boy in Here: Emerging From the Bonds of Autism," by Judy Barron and Sean Barron.

The students also watch videos, like the TED Talk by Rosie King, a teenager with autism.

Every other Wednesday the entire class meets for lunch and periodically the class meets for scheduled activities. The general education students keep weekly journals and fill out questionnaires that describe, for example, what interests their peers have or concerns they may have about them.

Jeanette Murphy said some of the peer LINKS will change next semester because other students have signed up, but also because that will provide an ad-

ditional student for each special education student to go to for friendship.

## Mutual benefits

Three senior LINK students said the class has not only benefited the special education students, but them as well.

Mary Green said she signed up for the class because she was considering career options, including massage therapy.

"I've always loved helping people," she said.

She decided to take the new class to help other students feel comfortable in social situations and to help them improve their grades.

Fellow senior Makayla Bowler said she is planning a career as a pediatric nurse. She is learning about social anxieties and learning disabilities. She said she benefits from the class by interacting with different groups of people.

"It opened my eyes to the differences people do have," she said.

An additional benefit is that she is learning from her peer.

"I enjoy spending time with my peer," she said, adding that at first she was not able to connect with him. "I can definitely see him being a friend."

Green, who also participates in the high school's chapter of Students Leading Students (which focuses on healthy behaviors), said she has suffered from social anxiety and felt "outside the group."

Her range of friends has now grown and she feels accepted.

"I wanted other kids to feel that way," she said. "It makes you feel like you have a purpose - there's people around you who care."

Senior Ricky Juillerat said he has a cousin with special needs and that he had talked with Mrs. Dalak about the class before signing up.

His peer, he said, now talks to more people, not just himself.

Green said she is learning what sets off her peer because of anxiety. She has encouraged her peer over the last month to work with people the student ordinarily wouldn't.



## RESPECT DIFFERENCES

As a way to demonstrate that everyone is different, Al "The Respect Guy" Ulman (center) had Charlton Heston Academy Instructional Dean Mark Church and students Larry Bauman and Emma Wylie each hold ropes of different lengths representing the dif-

ferences in people. Olman then took the ropes and turned them all the same length showing that people may have differences but are really all the same.

(Photo by Krista Tacey-Cater)

# CHA students R.O.A.R. about respect

By Krista Tacey-Cater

A loud "R.O.A.R." could be heard coming from the Charlton Heston Academy cafeteria the morning of Oct. 20 as students were learning about the ways to respect themselves, others and the environment.

Al "The Respect Guy" Ulman, began his presentation by telling the students the best way to gain another person's respect is to introduce themselves to others. After asking the students to simultaneously tell him their names, he asked the students to "R.O.A.R." or yell "respect others, act responsibly."

Ulman then told a story about respecting others. As a child Ulman broke his neighbor's window while playing baseball. He was nervous to tell his mother about the situation, which his mother already knew about.

His mother was understanding of the situation and then she took him to apologize to his neighbor. As a way to show respect to the neighbor, Ulman spent the next five weeks mowing the man's yard.

The neighbor then began showing him respect for taking responsibility for his actions and then paying him back by completing work for him.

After talking about respecting others, Ulman asked the students to think about

how to respect the differences of others.

"We all look different, but we are not because we are all people," Ulman said. "It's OK to be different."

He added that if every person was the same, life would be boring. He encouraged the students to respect others' differences and think about how they too are different from others.

Ulman then asked the students to consider how they can respect themselves. He said the best way to respect themselves is by "taking care of yourself."

"Show yourself respect, be happy with yourself," Ulman said.

He noted that one of the easiest ways

to respect themselves is to be clean, wash their hands and not spread germs to others. Ulman also asked the students to respect the environment and other people's property.

To end the program, Ulman said that the students should also show each other respect.

He said that a good policy is to treat others how they would like to be treated. He encouraged them to apologize to others when someone's feelings are hurt.

"It's better to be a buddy than a bully," Ulman said.

# Friends Helping Friends annual meeting Oct. 26

Friends Helping Friends will hold its annual meeting on Oct. 26 at Fred's of Roscommon. Dinner will begin at 6 p.m. with the business meeting taking place at 7 p.m.

Friends Helping Friends is a foundation that provides financial assistance to families with children under the age of 25 who are suffering from life limiting,

life threatening or terminal injuries, illnesses or diseases.

The public is welcome to attend the meeting and new members are encouraged to attend. Regular meetings are held the fourth Wednesday of the month at 7 p.m. at the AuSable River Center. For information, contact Karen Walper at 275-6014.

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