



HAYLEIGH SANDERS is a tenth grader at Olmsted Falls High School. She loves books and reading and is actively involved in school plays and debate. Hayleigh plays French horn and participates in marching band. She volunteers at a hospital and plans a career as a neurologist.

There are a surprising amount of people who would not dare discriminate against someone because they are physically disabled, or are of a different race, but would attack a person based on their mental abnormalities with zeal. As a person with Asperger's syndrome, I have had firsthand experience with being discriminated against simply because my mind works differently. All through my years at school, I have been subjected to various forms of public humiliation, such as name-calling, in the cafeteria and hallways. In second or third grade, someone convinced one of my good friends to hate and avoid me because I was different. People were so determined to subjugate me, to destroy my heart and soul, that I was even a target for violence during fourth grade. On the bus, a couple of girls would deliberately sit behind me so they could beat my ankles with an umbrella. Once someone threw a large stick at my head as I walked into school. In class, I faced constant teasing about the stuffed fox I used to bring everywhere (an example of the strange obsessive behavior characteristic of a syndrome of autism like Asperger's).

After living my life this way for several years, I began to close into a hard shell. When someone decided to sling a mud ball of hurtful words my way, I said nothing and let it pass. Even after that, they still found ways to make fun of me. "Are you deaf, too?" they would call, as hatred boiled my blood. In the past, I had tried fighting back. When they insulted me, I would respond with something harsh. However, they could always think of something more destructive to say in the end, because they were masters at their own ignorant game, and I was more dejected than if I had never said anything at all.

Around eighth grade, I read about Mohandas Gandhi, and knew what I had to do. Instead of ignoring my aggressors, or fighting their stupid hate with more hate, I just smile at them. It is amazing to see the look on a bully's face after I smile, when he was expecting me to say something back or start to cry. The reactions usually range from surprise to confusion, and even fear. After that, the assaults became fewer and fewer, until they were practically nonexistent. After that, I decided to go further. I tell my friends not to hate others, even if they are ignorant bullies, because hate really is a disease. Anyone who stoops so low as to hate another person is only admitting that he or she has caught that person's disease of hatred, and will only serve to propagate it through society. I have never been able to understand why these people want to spread and cultivate hatred; why they are so enamored with its harsh poisonous bite. Love is the only cure for hatred, and that when hate cannot find anyone to poison, it will slowly wither away.