

BRACHA GREENFELD SCHOLARSHIP FINALIST



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is a senior at Yavne High School. She enjoys working with children and volunteering in the special needs community. She enjoys reading and writing in her free time. After graduation, Bracha plans to spend a year studying in Israel before pursuing a college degree at Cleveland State University.

This past summer, I worked as a mother's helper in an overnight camp for individuals with special needs. One afternoon, when I was in my bunkhouse, I heard peals of laughter coming from across the room. Three teenage staff members were lounging across their beds, apparently in an animated conversation with a teenage camper. Only as I began to hear the words being said did I realize that the staff members were not laughing with the camper, but at her.

"Sophie*, how old are you?" one of the teenagers patronizingly asked. When Sophie responded that she was thirteen, she was met by a burst of laughter.

"Yeah, right!" one of the teens scoffed. "What are you really, fifteen, sixteen?"

As I listened to these words, a wave of nausea swept over my stomach, but my brain immediately began to churn out excuses for my inaction. Maybe the girls didn't mean to mock Sophie; maybe they were just trying to be friendly, though in a very misguided way. Anyway, I wasn't friends with these girls, so they would never stop what they were doing because of me.

"Sophie, come on my cell phone and talk to my mother!"

"Sophie, will you dance so I can take a video of you?"

I could no longer ignore the mockery packed into every word. A small yet strong voice inside of me whispered, "You are witnessing an act of evil. If you were a good person, you would stop this." Before the teen could turn on her camera, I was on the other side of the room. I took Sophie by the hand and led her out of the bunkhouse to her counselor.

I spoke to the Camp Director about the incident, and she in turn spoke strongly to the staff members regarding respect towards campers. However, I could not stop thinking about Sophie. I could not shake from my mind the sounds of the ridiculing voices; I could not forget the injustice and intolerance that had occurred.

Throughout high school, I have volunteered for the Friendship Circle, an organization which is committed to bringing friendship into the lives of children with special needs. This school year, I began volunteering for one of its programs, Teen Scene, in which teens with special needs learn life skills and go on outings into the community. Whenever I go out with my Friendship Circle friends, I hope that perhaps I am teaching someone out there—be it peer or stranger—how to have acceptance. I hope that through a force as simple and powerful as friendship, I am bringing the world closer to a time when what happened to Sophie will never happen again.

No one ever said it's easy to stand up against hatred, but there is little correlation between what's easy and what's right. We are witnesses to discrimination, one of the world's greatest evils. If we are good people, which I truly believe we are, we will stop the hate.

** Name has been changed*

