

HAYLEIGH SANDERS SCHOLARSHIP FINALIST



HAYLEIGH SANDERS

is a junior at Olmsted Falls High School. As a 10th grader, she won second prize in the *Stop the Hate: Youth Speak Out* essay contest. Hayleigh has many interests—she plays French horn, is on the track and field team and is a Lincoln-Douglas debater. She acts in school plays and has a summer internship in Baldwin-Wallace College's neuroscience department. She would like to become a neurosurgeon.

In horror, I stared at the cuts on my little sister's arm. Each was about an inch long, with its own halo of inflamed pink skin. They were scattered across her flesh in a listless pattern of random angles, like the path a sheet of paper takes as it falls to the ground. A pair of scissors had taken that path, held by her ten-year-old hands, as she cut herself in despair after being relentlessly bullied by other kids at school. These kids, having once been her best friends, decided it would be fun to torment her and play with her feelings by abusing her profound trust and friendship. They would even regularly prank call our house just to torture her. At once I was furious with the kids—all I wanted to do was corner them and scream at those cowards for sinking to that kind of level just to get a cheap feeling of superiority. Despite my anger, I knew that, from my previous experience with bullies, I could not hate them because hate is a poison that consumes not only the victim but the perpetrator was well.

As a person with Asperger's syndrome, I was ruthlessly attacked in intermediate and middle school for being different. Kids, just to feel popular and superior, subjected me to callous public humiliation and violence. Although I found that responding to their hatred with a little smile successfully repelled them, since hate is an ongoing disease only love can cure, the cuts on my sister's arm were too real. Passive love could only go so far—I knew I had to do something to break the vicious cycle. Bullying is rampant through my school district, and I knew that dozens of other kids were heartlessly tormented like my sister.

So, one day I approached my guidance counselor with an idea: to organize a district-wide day at school where everyone could, if even for only one day, drop all feelings of strife toward each other. I called it Let it Go Day. Months of planning have gone by, and the day is scheduled to take place on March 4, 2011. Although we are still crystallizing the specifics, students will be able to write down a pledge to let go of a particular dispute or hatred, and will receive green silicone bands inscribed with "Let it go" to remind them of their obligation. Green is the central color of the day, since it represents growth and new life. The principal even suggested that students write down their strife on slips of paper for a mass burning in the parking lot to represent their final "letting go". Whatever happens, my hope is that the perpetrators of hate in my school, even if only a handful, will realize how good it feels to be freed of their prejudice, and that the victims of their hatred will realize how good it feels to forgive and to be free of the hatred they feel against their tormenters.

