

EVELYN TING SCHOLARSHIP FINALIST



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is a senior at Shaker Heights High School. She loves to read, run cross-country and volunteer in the community. She plays violin in the Cleveland Youth Orchestra and is involved in her church. Evelyn has not made her college choice but plans to study psychology and/or sociology when she gets there.

Belonging. A concept so simple, yet something that every human seeks. Unfortunately, belonging is often a game with its own cast of winners and losers. In science class, Tom* shifts in his seat. He's usually quiet and studious, squinting beneath heavy frames. Sometimes he asks unconventional questions. "Why can't we eat the type of salt that's used on roads?" Heads swivel, and laughter ensues. When the lesson finishes, everyone lapses into conversation; everyone except Tom. He stands awkwardly to one side, trying to break through. When he does, he stutters. "W-w-what did you do over the w-w-weekend?" He trips through the question. And nobody answers.

After class, students pile into the hallway. "What does that boy do on the weekends, memorize the dictionary?" "Did you see how he races to get to the next class?" "And his questions...God, he's annoying!" Maybe people don't recognize that he has feelings, but I see him suffering. I see the silent stain of tears. I see him trying to make even just one friend.

When I see Tom... I see myself; laughed at, ostracized, alone. Not because we did anything wrong, but just because we are...different. Quirky and quiet, we are not "socially acceptable". How does it feel to always be on the outside? It's a sharp pain that turns into a dull throb. First, one person snubs you. Their friends see it and do the same. Soon, people who don't even know you, are convinced of the stereotype that builds. What's worse, I started to believe them. I felt worthless. I wondered if I was worthy of friendship.

It is dangerous to become socially detached and let this feeling define you. It can lead to depression, and in some cases of mental instability, violence. We have seen too many tragedies in the news. I am thankful to those who helped me when I was suffering. I feel we have a duty to include those who are alone. We could simply start a conversation, ask "How was your weekend?" say "hello". Quiet and unsure, I was afraid to reach out to others. However, each time it became easier and more rewarding.

Last summer, a classmate posted about her depression. Nobody seemed to notice, but I was concerned and invited her to talk over ice cream. In class, I listen to Tom and answer his questions. Little acts of caring can make a huge difference in how people think and feel about themselves. This is something that we can all do.

Last year, I founded a community service club called "Junto", which means "to join". We ask the question, "Who is my neighbor, and how can I help him?" I want to extend Junto's mission to promote community within our school. To start conversations about inclusion, I hope to form focus groups with Junto and the student body. With the support of student council and school counselors, I want to turn these discussions into outreach.

The belonging I seek must start with me.

**Name has been changed*