



Circle of Friends, a project of Community Partners  
11508 West Pico Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90064 [www.circleofriends.org](http://www.circleofriends.org) 310.312.6600

## INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- 1 Emeka's Story
- 1 Innovative Ideas:  
Clairemont High
- 2 Creating Compassion –  
Disability Awareness
- 3 Taking Stockton By Storm
- 4 Introducing Ruth Punt
- 4 Special Friendships on the  
Menu at Souplantation

## Emeka's Story

**By Emeka Ijewere**  
*COF Student Participant  
Santa Monica High School*

Hi my name is Emeka. I am in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade and I have autism. I have been in Circle of Friends (COF) for three years. When I was in middle school, I knew other students, but didn't talk to them a lot. Some students were not very nice to me.

At Samohi in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, there were a lot of people, but in the beginning of the year I was lonely because I didn't know them. I used to feel invisible because people would not talk to me because I was a little different. Sometimes it's hard for me to find the right words to say and to say them the right way. I used to feel upset.

*Emeka's Story continued on page 2*

## Message from Barb

**By Barbara Palilis, MA**  
*Executive Director, Circle of Friends  
Speech Language Pathologist, CCC-SLP*

Welcome to our first quarterly Circle of Friends (COF) newsletter, *The Path to Inclusion!* There have been many requests to build a connection and communication between school site Advisors of all of the chapters, so we can grow and learn from each other. I hope this will be just the beginning of our sharing.

I want to update everyone on the status of COF at this time. While we started from a grassroots effort at Santa Monica High School, we now have 21 chapters, from San Diego to Stockton. We also have two programs developing in Portland, Oregon. While we began at the high school level,

*Message from Barb continued on page 4*



*COF students hold guinea pig  
"mascot" at Clairemont High School*

## Innovative Ideas

## Clairemont High: Student Interns, Mascots and Exhibitions

**By Marianne Miller, MA**  
*Speech/Language Pathologist, CCC-SLP  
Clairemont High School  
San Diego Unified School District*

COF at Clairemont High School is one of several chapters started three years ago in San Diego Unified School District. We started with just 20 students but as the inclusion philosophy spread across the campus through recruitment, advertising and word of mouth, our enrollment has soared to over 196 students this year!

Clairemont High School is unique, 20% of its population is comprised of students with a wide range of disabilities; therefore we build circles around

*Clairemont High continued on page 3*

## Creating Compassion Through Disability Awareness

**By Ellen Goren, MA**

*Speech/Language Pathologist*

*Patrick Henry High School*

*San Diego Unified School District*

Disability Awareness is proving to be a valuable and valued program at Patrick Henry High School in the San Diego Unified School District. Last year, our second year with COF, we had six presentations. The presentations went well and the responses were very positive from both students and teachers.

In March, we formalized the program for this year. We presented to 22 freshman English classes, two developmental psychology classes and two sophomore English classes. With the support of the officers, we organized an information training session for 32 general education student participants.

We received very positive feedback from all the teachers! Students have been extremely polite and responsive to the presentations, especially because a student with a disability participated in each group. They often had questions for the student. Our special needs students speak from their hearts about their

strengths, interests, social challenges and growth as a result of their participation in COF, impacting the students in the class. They feel very proud when the classes applaud their speeches! It is empowering for them and their self-esteem has improved. It has been quite an experience for me to watch the growth in all of the participants.

With the problems facing society and young people today, a presentation that emphasizes the need to be kinder and more sensitive to any group of people is very important on our high school campuses. High school students are still very malleable and want to make the world a better place. The Disability Awareness program gives our students the opportunity to impact others and makes them think about how they can make our high school campus a more understanding and accepting community.



### Helpful Hints

Remember to always: Keep It Simple! As you come to the end of the school year and are planning for an End-of-the-Year celebration, maintain focus on the participants. It's not about the dancing, music, singing, etc.... it's about the interaction between friends. Enjoy!!!

- Barb

### Circle of Friends

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### Emeka's Story from page 1

Now, because of COF, I have met a lot of new people and now I have friends who understand me. COF helped me to talk better to my friends. I talk to them on the phone and go to the movies and also go shopping with them in the mall. I'm not lonely anymore. Because of Circle of Friends, I am not invisible anymore.



*Emeka Ijewere and his friend, Michael Bromberg.*

## Taking Stockton By Storm

**By Robert Lichter**

*Program Specialist  
Stockton Unified School District*

I was at an IEP last week when a mother of a student with Down Syndrome said in broken English, "My son loves Circle of Friends. I love Circle of Friends. My son knows everyone. Now we go to the mall and for the first time in his life kids from his school come up to him and say hello!" This is not an isolated incident that is happening for students in the Stockton Unified School District this year.



*Chavez High School Circle of Friends*

COF has taken our community by storm. Three comprehensive high schools, one elementary school, and a developmental center are currently participating in this "life changing" program. The culture of these schools was almost immediately impacted. With each passing month more students become involved, as COF becomes an integral component of each campus.

It is a pleasure to watch the students with special needs interact with the general student population. The excitement and enthusiasm is contagious, bringing an inclusive feeling to the formerly segregated facilities. Soon the "special ed. table" in the cafeteria will be nothing more than a memory of unenlightened times. The students, teachers, and parents thank Barbara Palilis and COF.

### *Clairemont High from Page 1*

several students with special needs. Due to transportation issues and limited access for our students, we host most of our monthly, large group activities on our campus during the day so the majority of students can participate.

After much thought and consultation with other high school program specialists who implemented various peer mentor programs, this year I decided to launch the "COF student internship." It was developed in order to meet the growing needs of students with disabilities in the classroom setting. Officers or peer friends who are members of COF are given the opportunity to obtain elective credit and serve as COF interns. Initially, they are trained by the speech/language pathologist. They then receive ongoing supervision and coaching. One period a day the student intern assists students with challenges within the special education classroom setting which provides the interns with daily practice in language facilitation. These students become very well versed

and skilled in coaching our students with challenges, which in turn allows them to become master coaches in facilitating social language behaviors during COF lunches and other activities. Additionally, these students assist with clerical duties related to the organization and smooth execution of the COF program. Currently, we have seven students who are serving as COF interns. Due to its success, we will continue to offer this opportunity.

A district graduation requirement for seniors to complete a "Senior Exhibition Project." Students are coached to select a project they are passionate about. This year three of our student members chose "COF" senior exhibition projects showcasing the COF program on campus.

Lastly, I would be remiss if I left out our fine and furry COF guinea pigs, "Caramel" and "Mocha" who visit every week during COF lunches. We have affectionately adopted them as our program mascots because they serve as comfort for our students and are certain to provide fuel for conversation. Due to the success of incorporating animals into therapy for students with challenges, a new program called "Paws'itive Teams" is underway which incorporates a team of trained dog handlers who assist the speech language pathologist in meeting target therapy goals. If you have any questions about our COF program, please contact me via email at [mmiller@sandi.net](mailto:mmiller@sandi.net).

### **We Need Your Help!**

It's been exciting to see Circle of Friends grow before our eyes. We are planning a Workshop for next March that will provide ASHA CEU's for speech pathologists. Please send us ideas that you would like us to include. Your input will help us provide you with the most useful information!

*"Friendship is the Flower that Grows in the Garden of Life."*



## Special Friendships on the Menu at Souplantation

**By Matt Rosenstein**

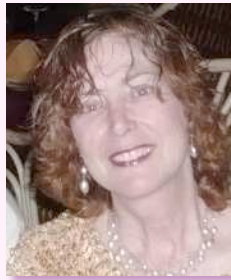
*COF Student Participant, VP, Public Relations  
Santa Monica High School  
Santa Monica Unified School District*

After three years of making friends, helping others, and changing lives as an active participant in the COF organization at Santa Monica High School, my journey is coming full circle. This evening was our annual Souplantation Halloween fundraiser. Following in the tradition of years past, members of our social skills program—students both with and without special needs—took over Souplantation in a bowl of positivity larger than the five bowls of chicken-noodle, chili, and clam chowder I ate combined. Yet, ironically that's not what made the night special.

Specials aren't on the menu, they're not planned, and normally you don't find them in the backroom at Souplantation. In fact when COF Executive Director Barbara Palilis approached me and said she had someone special to introduce me to, I knew instantly this would be my pivotal purpose in coming—aside from tasting the nine different flavors of soup. Ardently, I introduced myself to this postgraduate student said to have special needs; yet, he instantly touched me with his

Then he mouthed the letters, "K-O-B-E",  
and I knew I was on to something ....

### Who Am I?



## Introducing Ruth Punt

**By Ruth Punt, MA**

*Speech/Language Pathologist, CCC-SLP*

I'm excited to introduce myself to everyone. I'm a program consultant for COF as well as a board member. After working 34 years for the Santa Monica/Malibu Unified School District as a Speech/Language Pathologist, I retired and joined Barb in bringing inclusion to high school students with special needs. Over the years, as I worked with Barb, I've had the opportunity to attend some of the COF monthly functions. I saw my former students interacting with their peer friends and noticed that their social communication skills had blossomed.

Consulting with districts has been very rewarding—to see the programs grow at each school has been wonderful. This year, I have been consulting with the speech pathologist at Culver City Middle School. While COF looks different at the middle school level, it still brings an understanding and acceptance of differences to the campus. Students meet once a week in a classroom for lunch, games and parties.

Other partnerships that Barb and I share are Pathways at UCLA Extension and co-directing the Summer Circle program for students in West Los Angeles. It has been a joy to be part of this journey and I look forward to meeting you all soon.

willingness to be in the presence of total strangers—talk about courage. As I pedantically attempted to start a conversation, he seemingly lost interest. Ultimately, as I was ready to give up, to pretend like I had to leave early and head for the door, something inside told me to recall my very first lunch as a COF member. I had connected with my friend on the one level field that we all share an interest in playing on—the field of dreams. I thought, why not mention something that would be inspiring, not just another transcendental remark about tasty soup. I considered for a minute, and then quietly asked if he liked the Lakers. Without a doubt I got the biggest nod of the night. Then he mouthed "K-o-b-e" and I knew I was on to something. Ultimately, I've come to the conclusion that we all go through life with a concealed gift—a presence that is unwrapped solely by a circle of unplanned friendships that make our lives special.

### *Message from Barb from page 1*

there are now chapters at middle schools and colleges. We are partnering again with Pathway at UCLA Extension to continue to bring inclusion to the college level. It has been an exciting and rewarding journey to see lives changing before my eyes.

Each of you has created a program that is unique to your school, maintaining the integrity of the COF program. Many have already included Disability Awareness presentations, thereby sensitizing the campus climate. Most of you have run monthly activities off-campus, increasing the sensitivity of the community at large by demonstrating genuine understanding and acceptance of differences between teens with and without disabilities.

What you will find in the rest of the newsletter are articles written by other Advisors and staff, tips or reminders of the day, and articles written by both a general education student and one with a disability from their perspectives. Please feel free to send suggestions and articles that you might want us to include next time. Thank you for your hard work and for believing in the values of COF.