

Landon William Bunting: June Nelson Memorial Scholarship Essay

We are all on some spectrum of normal and in my family the word "normal" was never defined. My older brother has autism and every day was a new "normal" as we discovered his limitations and accommodated his needs. Empowerment in my mind is to make someone stronger, more confident, and allowing them to control the paths they take in their lives. He is my best friend and as we travel now in different directions I have appreciated the years of growing up together, feeling the respect and gratitude we feel for one another, he is the one who empowered me to become all that I can be.

It was not always easy and I was not always patient. He embarrassed me on so many occasions; wishing that he would stop flapping his arms, stop singing in the school hallways, expounding fact upon fact about some random topic to total strangers. I constantly worried about my association with him and my acceptance as people stared and talked about him behind his back. My brother is brilliant and his brain works in ways that is difficult to understand. His skills are unappreciated by most who only see him as "different" from the "normal". The ebb and flow of my feelings between acceptance and impatience made up most of my daily life. I felt an incredible desire to compensate for him. I challenged myself to succeed and pushed myself to be acceptable by those around me, even if it meant compromising my values and neglecting my brother's feelings. I am embarrassed now because I was incorrect on believing that he was a burden.

Eventually I found my own path. I saw myself emulating the strength, confidence and persistence that my brother had. He overcame many of his challenges by seeking out activities like theater, science and travel that allowed his mind to be stimulated by adults who were more patient than his peers. I realized as he became more and more successful that perhaps we are all on a human spectrum of "normal". My brother empowered me to chart a course that would achieve the results I wanted, to set goals, take risks and work harder than was required. He opened doors for me to explore and together we taught each other how to navigate into the future.

These experiences made me more compassionate and encompassing of people with disabilities and more accepting of people who are not following the social norms. It also has inspired me to look beyond a person's actions and determine if they too have a back-story that is influencing the way they participate and respond to others. It has allowed me to be more reflective on the lessons I have learned from living with autism and how I can use these lessons to empower not just myself but help others become empowered.

The most important part of empowerment is to believe yourself that "you can do it" and then communicating that confidence so that others can find their own way and expand on it. Positive feedback and strong convictions on the potential of success will allow a path to open. This became our families "mantra" for my brother. He was encouraged to be independent because through his own independent journey he became empowered.

I have tried to be a leader in many of the activities that I have participated in. I am constantly helping others to see their potential. Directing Youth Theater expand the confidence in many younger students. In Drama, Debate and Forensics. I was successful in teaching friends acting techniques that won them first place. I have also been president of our local youth birding group and through our work we have changed city ordinances that protect wildlife and the habitats that support them.

The right attitude creates a contagious atmosphere that can bring about success for everyone. Empowering others is also about appreciation of them, so that you can earn trust and respect. In order for that to be genuine it is important that I monitor my own responses and reactions, being mindfully aware of how fragile people can be. I have chosen a challenging career path in chemical engineering because I want to combine it with marine biology and oceanography in hopes of solving environmental issues. My brother empowered me to set this goal and I believe that everyone has the potential to empower others, we just need opportunities, and I am appreciate of all the opportunities my life has provided me.