

Understanding Disabilities: 30 Years of Making a Difference  
By David Maroney, Reading Chronicle

Increasing positive attitudes toward people with disabilities is the thrust of "Understanding Disabilities," a model program created by Reading resident Judy LeBlanc in 1984. Judy was blind, but was so impressed with the reaction she received after delivering a talk to students and teachers about her disability, that she created a disabilities awareness program in her hometown of Reading. While Judy passed away in 2009, her program now over 30 years old, serves as a national model for many other communities in helping children learn that we are all the same inside.

The mission of Understanding Disabilities (UD) is "to provide disability awareness programming in the Reading Public Schools, to help children see beyond people's disabilities and focus on the ways that we are all the same inside."

Each year 250 parent volunteers teach 150 classes in Reading schools, host classroom and community speakers, run awareness events, do fundraising and work to advance the mission of UD. The classroom work is woven into the school culture, and it's working. A recent study shows that Reading students have a significantly more positive attitude toward people with disabilities than their peers in a school without a disability awareness program.

It's all accomplished with a very small budget of around \$25,000 per year. Because the school system eliminated funding for UD due to tough economic times, all expenses are covered by private donations.

UD teaches elementary school children about a wide range of disabilities. During the next school year 1st graders will learn about food allergies and physical disabilities. Visual and hearing disabilities are covered in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. Autism spectrum disorder is the topic for 3<sup>rd</sup> graders, while in 4<sup>th</sup> grade it's both learning and developmental disabilities. Fifth graders will cover emotional and behavioral disorders using a brand new lesson plan.

Disability awareness has become more important over the years because of the introduction of the inclusive classroom model, where children who receive special education services are included in general education classrooms. Understanding Disabilities supports a school environment where every child is accepted and respected.

Karen Serevitch is the Executive director of Understanding Disabilities. She has 3 children, one with autism, and knows firsthand that all children benefit from the UD program. Her greatest reward is seeing the program working to its fullest, helping children gain awareness so they can understand each other's differences and treat each other with respect.

Serevitch relates some of the outstanding role models UD has brought to Reading through the years to speak to students and to the community as a whole: Jeff Bauman, a double amputee resulting from the Boston Marathon bombings; Travis Roy, who was paralyzed in a BU hockey accident; Shonda Schilling, wife of Red Sox pitcher Curt Schilling, and author of "The Best Kind of Different," the story of her family's journey with their son's Asperger Syndrome; Dr. Ned Hallowell, a New York Times best-selling

author and a leading authority in the field of ADHD; Gianna Hitsos, who at 15 years old, explained what it is like to live with autism; and Karen Gaffney who has Down Syndrome and who swam the English Channel as part of a 6 member relay team as well as swimming 9 miles across Lake Tahoe. Recently Nico Calabria visited students at Parker and Coolidge Middle Schools. Born without his right leg and hip, he became the first person to summit Mount Kilimanjaro on crutches, something he accomplished at just 13 years of age. Molly Sullivan Sliney is another shining role model who spoke to students about her struggles with dyslexia. A member of the 1988 and 1993 U.S. Olympic fencing teams, she tells students she is most proud of her college degree. Molly has been speaking to Reading 4<sup>th</sup> graders as part of Understanding Disabilities for 21 years.

All of UD's volunteers and staff are excited about the organization's next major goal. Thanks to a \$100,000 grant from the Cummings Foundation, UD is creating a new, innovative curriculum to bring age-appropriate disability awareness to Reading classrooms and to the broader community. UD is working closely with the Reading Public Schools to align with the framework being used in the district and to compliment other school programs. The new curriculum will dramatically advance UD's mission, and benefit the town's young people.

You can participate in an upcoming event with Understanding Disabilities. UD has partnered with Old South Methodist Church to "Light It Up Blue" in honor of World Autism Day on Saturday, April 2<sup>nd</sup>. Come out and see one of Reading's gems turned blue for a night to raise awareness of Autism Spectrum Disorder. There will be a photo on the front steps of the church at 7pm. It promises to be an event well worth attending to help us all increase acceptance and inclusion.

To become involved with UD, make a donation or for more information about helping children see beyond people's disabilities, you can visit [www.UnderstandingDisabilities.org](http://www.UnderstandingDisabilities.org).