

Montgomery County Junior Councils Outstanding Activity/Project Award

School Name: Gaithersburg Middle School

Organization Name: Gaithersburg Middle School Student Government Association (GMS SGA)

Advisor's Name: Katie Rossini

of members in your group: 33 students

of members participating in activity/project: 33 SGA members, 9 autism students, 5 art classes, other GMS students

Dates of activity/project: April 2007

I. Project Summary

Name of Project: Autism Awareness Month

The Gaithersburg Middle School Student Government Association was approached by Angela Migyanka, the GMS self-contained autism teacher, about organizing a project to raise awareness about autism. Since our school has two autism programs (Bridge and Ms. Migyanka's class), it is important that our student body understand the uniqueness of these students. Furthermore, since our school is focused on creating a more equitable school and celebrating our diversity, this program fits with our School Improvement Plan. Autism Awareness Month consisted of a poster contest, a candy-gram sale, and a buddy program. The event was a huge success, raising awareness of autism and giving students the opportunity to make new friends!

II. Project Objectives

The main objective of the project was to raise awareness of autism in general and of our programs specifically. The Autism Program at GMS serves students who need a small, structured classroom setting. This classroom provides intensive instruction throughout the day in the following areas: Language, Functional Academics, Self-Care, Vocational, and Community Training. By contrast, the Bridge Program is for high functioning students, many of whom are mainstreamed into the general education environment. These students take a regular courseload and state tests.

The next goal was for students to make friends with someone from a background different than their own. According to last year's Climate Survey, our student body thinks bullying and friendliness are issues at GMS. The project created a safe and supportive environment in which students learned about each other's differences. Students asked questions and learned from each other, alleviating some of the negative stereotypes that lead to bullying.

The last goal was to raise money for the SGA. We were able to pay for the poster contest prizes and the pizza party by selling candy-grams. The candy-grams also helped raise awareness of autism.

III. Project Activities

Autism Awareness Month consisted of three main activities. The first was the buddy program. SGA members chose buddies at the meeting on March 21, 2007. Everyone in the autism class was assigned two SGA buddies for the month. SGA members had to interact with their buddies at least two times each week. They could sit together at lunch, drop by their classroom to talk, and visit during R-Cubed. Buddies had to be respectful at all times! At an SGA meeting, members wrote and shared a short paragraph about their experience. These were displayed along with profiles of the autistic students in the hallway. A culminating pizza party for all participants was held on April 27, 2007.

The second activity was the poster contest. Guidelines for the contest were put in all teachers' boxes on March 27, 2007. The art classes were also encouraged to participate, particularly since their room is across the hall from the autism room. The theme for the contest was, "Become a piece of the puzzle; help find a cure!" This theme was chosen because the symbol for autism is a multi-colored puzzle piece. We also wanted to encourage people to be proactive and positive. Participants had almost

one month to work on their posters. Posters were due on April 23, 2007. Three gift certificates were given to the student winner, the student runner-up, and the adult winner.

The last activity was the candy-gram sale. We sold candy-grams consisting of Hershey's hugs and kisses to show our love of people with autism. The card attached was created by our autism students and contained a message about the disease. Candy-grams were sold for \$1.00 during lunch from April 18th to April 20th. Candy-grams were delivered throughout the school day on April 23, 2007 by our buddies. The money raised was used to pay for supplies for the project.

IV. Leadership

All 33 members of the Student Government Association worked on some aspect of the project. Social Chair Bria Jacobs and Human Relations Chair Bridget Akinsade coordinated the buddy program. The 9 students in the Autism Program participated in the event by being buddies with 18 SGA members (two per student). The autism teachers helped answer questions about the buddies and their disease, making the experience more comfortable and educational. Academic Chair Gabrielle Esparraguera and Advocacy Chair Sebastian Martinez organized the poster contest. Both students and adults could submit posters. Chris Cuff's 5 art classes also participated by making posters for the contest. Treasurer Steven George and Chief of Staff Carlos Mejia ran the candy-gram sale. Public Relations Chair Jenny Ha collaborated with our new school newspaper to publicize events online and to document the week's activities.

V. Project Results

The efforts of the Student Government Association helped bring autism to the forefront. Students thanked the organization for planning these events and raising awareness about the disease. Principal Carol Goddard and other staff members commended the SGA for their programming and activities. All-in-all the events of the week were successful and well-received!

Letter to parents

April 20, 2007

Dear Parents/Guardians,

Your student has volunteered his/her time to be a buddy to a student in the Autism Program for the month of April, which is Autism Awareness Month. For the past week your child has been a buddy to a student with Autism. Students interact by eating lunch in our classroom and coming to our class during R3 to assist students with work. We would also like for him/her to join us in the community. Students in the Autism Program participate in community-based instruction. While in the community, students work on communication, socialization, behavior and safety goals. Our schedule is as follows:

Monday 4/23/07 10am-12:00pm Montgomery Mall

Wednesday 4/25/07 10am-12:00pm Rio Shopping Center

Friday 4/27/07 10am-1pm TBA (This will be at a restaurant; we will eat out to celebrate the end Autism Awareness Month.)

Students will assist their buddy while in the community but will always be supervised by MCPS staff members. Students are transported on an MCPS school bus. By signing this form, you are giving your student permission to participate in community-based instruction on 4/23, 4/25 and 4/27.

If you have any questions, please email Angela_L_Migyanka@mcpsmd.org or call (301)840-4554.

Sincerely,

Angela Migyanka, Special Education Teacher, Autism Program

I give _____ (student's name) permission to participate in community-based instruction on 4/23, 4/25 and 4/27.

Student's Name _____

Parent's/Guardian's Signature _____

Date _____

Autism Buddy Lunch (below)



Preparing Candygrams (below)



Poster Winners (below)



1st Place



2nd Place



3rd Place

(additional PDF files)