

## **STAND UP FOR JUSTICE AWARD NOMINEE APPLICATION AND SUBMISSION**

“This is where I’m meant to be.” It’s a sentiment I felt deeply from my very first moment in my very first course to become a School Counselor. Having been an educator for fifteen years prior to that day, I knew working with adolescents during their middle school years, what can be one of the most alienating and estranging time in an individual’s life, is exactly where I wanted to be. But during my time as an educator, I often felt like I was missing a piece of what I was created to do. Frequently as a teacher I wanted to help students become more confident, to love learning, and to grow into the very best version of themselves that they could. But I also knew I wanted to be able to devote my full time to working with students, their families, and my fellow faculty members to create a whole-school environment dedicated to acceptance, understanding, and inclusion of others. I wanted to be an advocate for children. I wanted to help them grow in their love for self and others. I wanted to be the person in their lives that I so needed when I was their age. Being a School Counselor has allowed me to sew advocacy and justice into every thread of my work with the children of Collier County. My goal in all I do, whether in writing curriculum for small groups, working with students who feel excluded and alone, teaching self-advocacy to my students and families, or coaching teams and leading groups to target our often overlooked populations here on campus, is to both embody in myself and develop in others the ideals outlined by the Jewish Federation of Greater Naples’ Stand Up for Justice Award. It is why just being nominated by those I deeply respect in the profession is, to this date, one of the greatest honors of my life.

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One means I am able to accomplish this goal is through a District initiative called “We Dine Together”. I can’t say enough about the opportunity I have within this resource. The outline for We Dine Together is similar across all schools in Florida: a student-led movement to empower children and adolescents to be leaders and workers of positive change within their school community. This platform allows me to work with my student leaders to develop activities and projects that spread the ideas of inclusion and empowerment to the entire student body. “Chalk the Walk” is a favorite activity of my We Dine group. The idea is to “throw kindness around like confetti” as we like to say in this group. I worked together with my students to discuss ways they believe students can often feel alienated. Topics like physical insecurities, differences in race and religion from their peers, as well as challenges with sexual identity were suggested. We then used sidewalk chalk to write encouraging messages to students, just little notes of acceptance and love they can see as they transition between classes. Because sometimes it just takes a moment, a smile, a kind word from someone to feel cared for or accepted, and that’s what we work to do. Another way we accomplished this is through Positive Post-Its. These are specific messages left in the hallways of our building, in bathrooms, and on classroom doors, letting students know they are not alone and they are loved. Another simple but equally impactful activity we love to do in We Dine Together is an activity called “Cross the Room”. This is a game that is aimed at helping students see they have a lot more in common with others, even those that may look different, come from different racial or religious backgrounds, or have different socioeconomic standings, are more alike to us than we know. Different categories are called out, such as, “Cross the room if you have siblings”, or “Cross the room if you were born outside of Collier County”. It’s often easy,

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particularly in middle school, to feel like you're the only one; like you're alone. I love this activity and how it gets the students talking. They find out they are from Puerto Rico, for example, but so is this other student's mom or family. They find out that while they celebrate a certain holiday, these students over here do, too. The verbalizations the students are able to speak coming out of this activity are always beautiful and poignant and inspiring. Helping them see commonalities where there previously were none while also raising awareness that others have stories and experiences we may not be aware of is some of my most important work.

Another outlet I am able to work through to build a community of inclusion and acceptance is through an initiative I began several years ago called "Rush Day". This is a term familiar to many, generally referring to pledges made to sororities or fraternities at the post-secondary level. But at our Rush Day, every student has an opportunity and is encouraged to find their passion, to find whatever he or she is good at, and pursue it wildly. Club sponsors, whether they be faculty members or students, are present on Rush Day to share details about their club and encourage students to sign up. It's held at the beginning of the day, right at our bus loop, so every student has access. Sponsors then take the sign-up sheets and use these to reach out to students and their families to get them connected to the club. Not only are our students able to get plugged into activities that grow their skills, but they serve as a huge connection piece for our outlier students who may not find themselves on a sports or academic teams generally offered. Those clubs are present at Rush Day, as well, but we also have clubs like Cooking Club, Crochet Club, Rubik's Cube Club, Yoga Club, and Board Game Club. This is crucial as we look to countless studies, including those conducted by Bearman and Moody and published in the American Journal of Public Health (2004) that found that socially isolated

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adolescents are far more likely to experience suicidal ideation than their connected peers. But when students don't fit the mold of an athlete or an academic, it can be hard to find where one "fits in". Rush Day is a chance for students to find a place to belong, a place to connect with others who share common interests, a place to find acceptance.

Cooking Club is another means in which I am able to advocate for students and help them have equal opportunities. Students today are often in households where both parents work. As a girl growing up in Washington, DC, my growing up years were wonderful in many ways, but they also included needing to take care of a lot of things myself because I, too, had parents that worked. When parents are busy working, sometimes multiple jobs, there isn't always time to invest in teaching basic life skills. Microwave dinners are convenient and often essential to many families, but what if these students were given the opportunity to learn how to cook a few basic and nutritious meals for themselves, improving their health and giving them skills that can be used for a lifetime. Cooking Club works on specific kitchen competencies, such as accurate ingredient measurement, how to read a recipe, safe cutting practices, and general food safety, such as paying attention to expiration dates and avoiding cross-contamination. The students enrolled and I make pancakes, hamburgers, quesadillas, mug cake, homemade buttercream icing, and various styles of eggs, which are all things that can be made from home with a few simple ingredients. Many children are taught these things at home, but many are not. Providing my students with this opportunity is important for allowing them the same access to safe and healthy food as their peers. It helps ensure they, too, have access to the skills they need to live an independent and healthy lifestyle.

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Finally, I am also the National Junior Honor Society advisor. As I tell the students in NJHS frequently, our job, our main goal, is to serve, support, and love our community. We do not want to be a gathering of academically successful individuals without ever giving back to the community that supported us and helped make us who we are today. An idea most of my students can recognize and relate to comes from *Spiderman*: “With great power comes great responsibility”. We never want to squander what we have been given or use it to serve only ourselves. So with every service project we do, the question is always, “What can we do to love and serve others today?” Most recently I am proud of the initiative we are working on for Valentine’s Day. In years past, Candy Grams have been sold, chocolates attached to a card and sent to friends. They usually sell for \$1.00 each and are a huge fundraising source for NJHS. But what if we did something different this year? What if we did something where every child in the school received a Valentine, written especially for him or her? I challenged my students to brainstorm and come up with ideas to make this happen...and they did. There will be no Candy Gram sales this year. There will be no child sitting in a classroom feeling rejected alone and they watch their peers receive them. There will be no feeling isolated or excluded when one is not received. Our project will make a card for every student in the school, with handwritten notes to each and every student, telling each student something wonderful, appreciated, and amazing about them. Just imagine a school where every single child is celebrated for their uniqueness, for what they bring to our school community, for who they are. That is a school I want to be a part of. That is a world I want to live in.

The children we have the honor to work with today are the very same humans that will be shaping the world we live in tomorrow. If we shield them from differences or sacrifice

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diversity in the name of comfort, we all lose. Because we're not all the same, and that is the amazing and beautiful thing about this world. Let's embrace that, and let's work together to teach this next generation that there is good in everyone and greatness in diversity, if we'll only open our hearts to see it.

#### Cited

Bearman, P. S., & Moody, J. (2004). Suicide and Friendships Among American Adolescents. *American Journal of Public Health, 94*(1), 89–95. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.94.1.89>