

1st Place, Non-Fiction

Friday Night En(light)enment
By Jungin Lee

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Back to school means new notebooks for some, no more binge-watching Netflix at 2am for others, and in the case of many high-schoolers around the world, Friday night football games. On the night of the first football game of the season for my high school, hundreds of teenagers wearing leis and holding pineapples on sticks (the theme was Hawaiian) swarmed into the stadium with the hope that we would beat our rival team. It was one of the first occasions that my parents let my friend drive our wheelchair accessible van, so I was filled with a sense of excitement and freedom as we cruised onto school grounds. We arrived late and had immense trouble finding a parking spot, but it didn't matter since my friends and I get premium seating in the first row of the bleachers (It's the only wheelchair accessible seating option). Officially being juniors now, it was the first time we didn't feel awkward sitting with the upperclassmen in the front of the stands.

With the bleachers rumbling with school spirit, purple glitter being sprinkled all over us, and my friends and I laughing and pointing out cute football players, you could say it was a fun night—one that really exemplifies the pure joys that come with high school. But aside from all that, I witnessed something that night that, in all honesty, kind of sucked (besides our school losing the game).

In front of me, also on the first row of the bleachers, was a girl with special needs who stood alone, sometimes watching the game and sometimes looking back up at the people in the bleachers. I noticed that occasionally, some students would come down from the top of the bleachers and spend some time with her, talking and watching the game

together. One of these students, after staying with her for about five minutes, said, “Okay, I’m going to go back up now before someone takes my seat. I’ll talk to you later.” And with that, she found her way back up the crowded bleachers and took a seat with her friends.

Seeing this made me think of a similar situation I had found myself in at another football game a few months back when I was a sophomore, sitting in the exact same spot on the bleachers. Next to me sat Sarah, the girl I have recently celebrated my 10th best-friendiversary with. We became friends when she approached me in first grade because she thought my wheelchair-accommodating desk was cooler than the other kids’ desks. Since then, our friendship has escalated to the point where she came to my house while my family and I were on vacation for a month and took a nap on our couch because she missed our house. I’m immensely grateful for the fact that I can tell her anything and know it will stay between us, the fact that we can communicate with just the briefest of eye contact, the fact that we can have different opinions sometimes but still support each other one hundred percent, the fact that I am confident enough to say that if we were to get married right now I would be her maid of honor and she would be mine, and the fact that she has never once looked down upon me in our decade of friendship. Sarah, if you’re reading this, you rock.

That night at the game sophomore year, I asked Sarah to take a picture with me, as we do at every football game and on any other occasion that seems like a good time to document our lives. As we struck a pose and captured the moment, a guy sitting behind us asked Sarah if I was her “Best Buddy”.

For the people unfamiliar with the organization called Best Buddies, it is a club at many schools nationwide that pairs the “normal” kids with “special needs” or “disabled” kids and has them do various activities together.

Sarah, enraged, firmly stated that I in fact was not her “best buddy”, and inevitably there was a moment of awkwardness for us all. I tried to lighten the mood by laughing and saying, “But Sar, I thought we are best friends.” But I would be lying if I didn’t feel a little bit of resentment toward the guy that said that, as well as toward Spinal Muscular Atrophy for putting me in a situation like that.

Now, here’s a disclaimer: I am not writing this to pity myself or the girl with special needs I saw, nor am I trying to bash on her friend for leaving her that way. I’m writing this because these two nights under the Friday night lights allowed me to have an epiphany about human nature in general that I think is important to be aware of.

As in the situation with the girl in front of me at the recent football game, I realized that people have absolutely no problem coming down to the level of others who are in need. In fact, they love to help out and are extremely willing to do so, and that’s great. The problem arises after this, when these people are not willing to bring those in need up to their same level of “privilege”. What was stopping that student from inviting the girl to sit with her and her friends in the bleachers? She was worried someone would take “her spot” up at the top.

Whether it be the physical location on the bleachers of a high school football game or our place in society, we leave our comfortable and “superior” spot to go help the “inferior” for a little bit, but don’t invite them to come back up with us. We hurry back to our

higher position before someone takes our place. Then there are the people like me—the bystanders who watch these things happen and don't really do anything about it. It's a vicious cycle that won't stop on its own, and because it happens so often, it leads people to assume that there is no way a "superior" could be on the same level, let alone friends, with an "inferior" unless as an act of sacrifice or part of a service program. Truthfully, there is no other way I can describe that than as just plain sad, and I refuse to believe that that's the only way this society will continue to revolve.

Though I went to these football games to enjoy being young with my friends, I came back each time with a little more wisdom than I had before. My greatest hope is that this tiny bit of perspective can act as a piece in the puzzle of figuring out how to break the cycle. And boy do I need help staying in this perspective myself:

Don't help the lowly survive where they are; elevate them to a place where you won't see them as lowly anymore.