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What Is an Ambassador?

For those of you who would like to know where the name Autism Ambassadors came from, it was inspired by my love of government and politics, which have been passions of mine since I was younger. (Robert Kennedy's quote on my first section heading sums up my feelings on the subject pretty nicely.) As I read about international politics—yes, I admit it; I was an elementary school policy wonk—I kept coming across the term *ambassador*. In the political sense, an ambassador is someone who shuttles back and forth from country to country, trying to keep all parties involved on good terms based on proper communication. I thought that this was an excellent definition of what it was I wanted to do with Autism Ambassadors, right down to the international shuttle diplomacy part. (This is literally true; as of this printing, Autism Ambassadors is in Australia and Canada and is making inroads into other countries.) I viewed relations between typical students and students with autism the way I would view relations between two countries who just didn't understand each other and needed help from an outside party to communicate better.

So what does this mean for you, the student? Well, as I said in the introduction, if you're even reading this book in the first place, you are probably the kind of person who embodies exactly what it is we are looking for in an Ambassador. So let me list the qualities we typically seek out in people that make them excellent candidates for Autism Ambassadors. You are

Someone who is truly inspired to help others: I don't know about you, but I have read more than my fair share of articles that claim that our generation is the most self-involved, narcissistic, me-first generation yet.

I couldn't disagree with this more; I have been to dozens of schools all over the country and have held Skype conferences and training sessions with others all over the world, and I have had the good fortune to have encountered hundreds of students who epitomize what I'm talking about here. You are someone who really cares about his fellow students and is willing to sacrifice the occasional lunch hour or three to prove it.

Someone who has a history of commitment in other areas: How many people do you know who think that it would be nice to help out others? An Autism Ambassador is the kind of person who, rather than thinking about doing something for the good of her community, actually gets out and does it. He or she—and by that I mean you—is active in afterschool mentorship programs, religious organizations, entrepreneurial and sports-related organizations, science fair projects, children's birthday parties, camp counseling, and a whole host of other activities that require hard work, tremendous people skills, and significant follow-through abilities. You are the kind of person who sees a problem and, rather than simply opening your mouth about it, wraps your mind around it until you have hatched a solution.

Someone who is comfortable interacting with peers with autism: Most of your peers see someone with autism and duck their heads or move away. Even if they don't mean to be hurtful or exclusionary, they don't feel comfortable approaching, or interacting with, a student with autism. You are the kind of person who sees past the tics and obsessive behavior and realizes that underneath the seemingly uninterested exterior is a kid, just like you, struggling to fit in, overwhelmed by a world that almost always doesn't make sense. You may not always know exactly what's going on inside his mind, but you will do your best to try to understand your partner with autism. Ambassadors can't bridge every communication gap or challenge they face, but they almost always leave behind a situation that is better thanks to their involvement.

Someone who is willing to learn and perform the roles of both leader and follower: You might have heard the phrase, "Too many chiefs, not enough Indians" (or, to put it more diplomatically, "not enough Native Americans"). Well, that might be the case in most groups, but it is not in Autism Ambassadors. We go more by the credo of "There are no small parts, only small actors," and there are no small actors in Autism Ambassadors. Every Ambassador is expected to be both leader and follower, because our lesson plans require that kind of versatility. You might find yourself playing lead Ambassador during our **Raise Your Hand** lesson plan. Or playing the student with autism during **Riding the Bus**. Or functioning more as an extra during one of our many cafeteria-based lesson plans. The point is that no matter what is asked of you, you're not only capable of but willing to play your part.

Someone who wants to learn and improve herself: It's a given that the gift of giving is the greatest gift of all. It's a given that Ambassadors give to their peers and, in doing so, improve themselves. But Autism Ambassadors is much, much more than simply a charitable organization.

The fact that our program takes place in schools underscores the fact that Autism Ambassadors is an opportunity to learn, not only about autism and its manifold mysteries, but about everything from how the brain works neurologically to how people interact behaviorally.

Someone who wants to partner with a student who possesses similar interests: While students with autism might not present the same way their typical peers do, their behaviors do not hide the fact that underneath their surface differences they possess many of the same traits as their typical peers. Which means they love basketball. They love popular music. They love to dance, act, sing, follow politics, build things, and go to movies. Autism Ambassadors starts its mentoring process from a place of compatibility by pairing Ambassadors with like-minded peers, thus getting them off on a solid footing and helping them build real, long-term sustainable friendships.

And most of all? Someone who is great at having a good time: Okay, we're not talking life of the party here. What I mean is that there are people who always seem to be having fun, no matter where they go (just as there are people who always seem miserable, no matter how fun an environment they are in). If you are one of those people who looks at the glass as being half full, who knows how to make lemonade out of lemons (but preferably not mountains out of molehills), then Autism Ambassadors wants you. You are the type of person who joins a group because you truly think it will be fun, or eye-opening, or educational, or all three. And not just because you think it will look good on your college resume. It will, but trust us; colleges are pretty good at weeding out the people who join groups just for the prestige. You are the type of person whose enthusiasm is infectious, not only to the student with autism but to the typical student as well. In short, you are the epitome of the qualities we listed above.