



PROMOTING AWARENESS, CONNECTION, AND INCLUSION

By Amy Hibbs and Allison Huffstutler



Amy Hibbs and Allison Huffstutler are two mothers on a mission. Amy is an Occupational Therapist and Allison is a former Greenville County teacher. In addition, both Amy and Allison have children with disabilities. When their children started school, it became apparent to Amy and Allison that there were opportunities for improvement in school and community settings pertaining to inclusion of students with disabilities.

The pair joined forces in 2021 as founders of the non-profit organization BRIDGED. The purpose of BRIDGED is to provide education, resources, and innovative solutions to promote awareness, connection, and inclusion of people with disabilities in their communities. BRIDGED upholds the values of empathy, awareness, effective communication, and community building. Amy and Allison's vision for BRIDGED is working towards a world where everyone is valued, invited, and participating in their communities.

When Amy's son Caleb started school, she learned right away that her family's experience in public school was going to be very different than what she imagined.

"When I first saw the sign for Caleb's classroom, it didn't say 'Mrs. Smith's Class/3rd Grade,'" Amy says. "Instead, it simply said 'ID (Intellectual Disability) – Moderate.'"

On another day, Amy was walking through the school and noticed her son's art hanging in the hall. Again, the art was not labeled with the teacher's name; it was labeled "Art by ID Moderate Students." Amy realized

that Caleb and his classmates were defined and referred to by their disability, not by their names.

Then, Amy visited Caleb during lunch at school. She noticed how Caleb's class sat alone at a separate table. She also noticed the way the other students looked at Caleb and his classmates and occasionally laughed at them.

It was at that moment that Amy realized there had to be a way for students with disabilities to not just attend local schools, but they needed to be seen as valuable, invited to be included and they needed to be actively participating in their schools. Students and teachers alike needed education about disability, models for how to talk about disability and opportunities to interact with individuals with disabilities.

Allison's call to action came about a bit differently. Before the birth of her daughter, Haley, Allison did not have a lot of education or experience with disability. After Haley's diagnosis of Rett Syndrome and Autism, Allison and her husband wanted to be effective advocates, so they educated themselves about disability by learning from and listening to voices in the disability community.

When Allison's son was in 3rd grade, he casually mentioned that he mainly talks to his friends about his sister, Emily, because he didn't know what to say about Haley. Allison realized that she had been educating herself about disability, but she had not effectively communicated what she was learning to her own children.

Allison reached out to Tyler's teacher and asked her if she could teach a lesson about disability and kindness to his class. Tyler's teacher was very supportive and agreed. Allison and Tyler's teacher set a date in March 2020. As luck would have it, all schools were shut down the day before Allison was scheduled to teach that lesson.

"Even though I never had the chance to teach that lesson, preparing it ignited something within me," Allison says. "I knew I wanted to educate others

about disability in an effort to reduce the stigma and fear that is often associated with disability."

In addition to parenting children with disabilities, both Amy and Allison are members and leaders of organizations that advocate for the rights and advancements of people with disabilities. Their passion for advocacy, love for their community, and blend of personal and professional experience are ideal for leading BRIDGED.

Currently, BRIDGED offers Disability Awareness Week and disability focused in-house field trips for schools, provides DSS certified professional development training for school staff, provides training for parents of children with disabilities, and offers a leadership development program for students in grades 4th-8th.

Most recently, BRIDGED developed and provided a virtual summer camp program to support students with disabilities and their families during the summer months. The camp provided activities to maintain academic, social, behavioral and therapeutic gains made during the prior school year.

BRIDGED is excited for Fall as they continue to grow existing programming and develop new programming to address additional identified needs in the community. Their goal is to help create systemic change that will impact their communities for years to come.

If you'd like to learn more about BRIDGED, visit their website at bridgedsc.org.

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