

Understanding Disabilities, Inc.
Contact: info@understandingdisabilities.org

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

High Schooler with autism speaks to middle school students as part of Understanding Disabilities middle school curriculum.

On April 30, 2014, Understanding Disabilities hosted an exceptional young woman to speak to the students at the Coolidge and Parker Middle Schools. Gianna Hitsos is an 18-year-old Groton-Dunstable High School student who was diagnosed with autism at the age of two. She is now an accomplished young woman who has discovered an aptitude for theater and music. According to Paula Tucci, Executive Director of UD, “Gianna has a powerful story to tell and Understanding Disabilities is happy to be able to share it with Reading middle school students.”

Gianna's parents knew something was wrong when their two-year-old daughter stopped speaking and began rocking and flapping her arms. Their daughter was diagnosed as having autism. Years of therapy followed to help Gianna learn to speak again.

At that time, the family lived in a town near Philadelphia. Gianna began attending elementary school. Fellow students had trouble understanding why Gianna was different and she was often bullied.

When her family moved to Massachusetts, Gianna asked to address the student body at her middle school, she wanted to help students and teachers understand autism better. At the same time, she discovered she had a talent for singing and acting and nurtured those interests. She has since been given the opportunity to sing twice at Fenway Park to the cheers of 38,000 Red Sox fans. Gianna will attend Gordon College in the fall where she will major in music. She hopes to be the first actress with

autism on Broadway.

Gianna encouraged Reading's middle school students to treat those who have autism, or other differences, with respect. "Sit with them at lunch or on the bus," she told them. "Don't ignore them, because inclusion is a beautiful thing." Gianna also told students of her personal campaign to bring awareness and change perceptions of autism one song at a time.

Autism, also known as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), is a group of developmental disabilities that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges. People with ASD may communicate, interact, behave, and learn in ways that are different from most other people. The learning, thinking, and problem-solving abilities of people with ASD can range from gifted to severely challenged. Some people with ASD need a lot of help in their daily lives; others need less. More people than ever before are being diagnosed with ASD. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates 1 in 68 children in the United States has been identified with autism spectrum disorder.

Understanding Disabilities has been helping children in the Reading Public Schools see beyond a person's disability and view each other as individuals and friends for 29 years. For more information, or to make a contribution, contact Understanding Disabilities, Inc., PO Box 465, Reading, MA 01867 or visit their website at www.UnderstandingDisabilities.org.