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Affecting people is an important aspect of life. My name is Leah Gingrich, I have attended Mother Teresa Catholic Elementary School for the last 8 years and next year I will attend Ursuline Academy. I have always loved helping others. I feel like I would not love helping others if it was not for the people that made me into the person I am today.

When I was when in kindergarten, I was diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy. I faced many challenges like I had trouble in gym class and simple things like rope jumping. I had a friend that would help me when we were at places like Pump It Up, or playgrounds. He always supported me and if he noticed it was getting hard to for me, he would give me a little push. He helped me climb things, and would make sure I would not fall. He showed me to be there for people even if they are going through a rough time and because of his influence, helping people is a big part of my life today.

My struggle with Cerebral Palsy did not stop then. When I was in the first grade I started a new school and I was struggling in gym class. I could not catch a ball or run across the gym because of my Cerebral Palsy. I was faced with a decision, to give up or try to make the best of it. I chose to make the best of it. A person was behind this choice; her name was Paige. Paige was almost always smiling, she never gave up no matter what was thrown at her, and she was always happy. Paige and I had to go to physical therapy, wore leg braces, and had trouble doing simple things. For instance one day she showed me that she

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could jump, something that most people take for granted. I was so happy for her. We celebrated her being able to jump, it was a huge accomplishment for her and I was happy for her. It was so much more than a jump it was progress to being able to do other things. It was great to have Paige in my life because being a first grade girl with leg braces is not easy. It was very comforting to know someone who was going through something similar. Then the unthinkable happened, Paige unexpectedly passed away.

A year after Paige's death, Paige's Princess Foundation was started. I work with the Foundation to this day. The Foundation is dedicated to helping kids with lifelong disabilities, such as cerebral palsy, autism and Down's Syndrome. We host events like sensory friendly movies at local movie theaters; we have an annual 5k and carnival, and a Princess Tea. We've made occupational therapy bags, filled with supplies kids with special needs are able to use to at home to help with their fine motor skills. I not only help to keep the memory of my best friend alive through the Foundation, but I am also able to help others who are going through some as the same struggles I have gone through in my life. Nothing compares to the smiles of the people we help.

At a recent charity function, I shared my story, how therapies have changed my life and how Paige's perseverance reminded me to never give up on my goals. I have overcome many of the difficulties that I faced in my earlier life. I talked about the different therapies I did and how they made me stronger.

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I wanted to give other kids who have disabilities hope that their disability doesn't define them and also I wanted to give them the comfort Paige gave me by letting them know that they are not alone.

Last year my sister's class was learning about Cerebral Palsy during Everybody Counts. Everybody Counts is a day when my school spends the afternoon talking about a disability and each grade learns about a different disability. I chose to talk to my sister's class about Cerebral Palsy and how it has affected me. I brought in my old leg braces and talked for about 15 minutes about how Cerebral Palsy has challenged me in my life. It was a great experience. I love talking to people about my disability because I feel like it shows them that just because a person is in a wheelchair, has leg braces, or any other adaptive equipment, it does not make the person any different. I reinforced that just because a person may appear to be different, the right choice is to keep an open mind and get to know a person before making a quick judgment.

All of this has taught me to never judge a person based off of their differences and I want to pass this lesson onto my peers. Everyone is special and being special is amazing. The world would be extremely boring if everyone was the same. The cliché, "Never judge a book by its cover," to me is how people should live their lives. I like to teach others about my past. It is important to me to let my peers know that you can never know everything that is going on in other

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people's lives. Everyone has his/her own struggles that he/she may not be sharing.

I have learned this lesson from so many different people and my goal is to teach it to others. This is why I do not judge people, why I forgive them no matter what they do and try to always smile. Saint Teresa of Calcutta said, "Peace begins with a smile." Little things like smiling can help a person through hard times, just like Aubrey's smile affected the people around her. I believe that I am a role model to my classmates because, I do not judge based on trivial things like someone's appearance or clothes. I forgive those who have hurt me, and I am a friend to all. I know I have affected my classmates because I have led by example.

Life is an interesting thing. I want my life to be about continuing to affect others in a positive manner. People come in and out of your life all the time but only a few have you stop and think about your life. My life story is full of people changing the way I think: people like the boy who helped me, Paige, and the people I help in Paige's name. My hope is to continue to help shape people's lives by sharing my experiences of growth, change, and what I have learned through the years.