

By Tony Marra

To look at me in most ways I am just a normal high school student. I get good grades, play sports and I am a member of the business honor society. This probably seems pretty typical of anyone else in the country. What makes me different is what can't be seen. At age 2 I was diagnosed with autism. In fact, up until middle school, I was on an IEP and required additional assistance with school. I have had to work extra hard throughout my life to be seen as just like everyone else.

Autism is usually symbolized as a puzzle piece. Usually, because it has an unknown cause and there is no cure. I prefer to think the puzzle piece should be used to recognize that autism is a small piece in an individual's life. Some people have extremely severe autism, so severe, that they have to have help every day. Then there are some people like me, who have autism who are very successful in school, everyday life, and in the world. Growing up with Autism has made me see the world through a different lens than most other people. Having an older brother who has a more severe case of autism has also helped me understand that autism is more than just a diagnosis, it is an important piece of my life.

Autism has also let me have experiences that I would never have without it, I have been surrounded my whole life with friends of all abilities. It changes how you view your peers and lets you see everyone has something to contribute. Having everyone included has always been important to me. This is why I joined Unified Sports because they include everyone no matter their ability from typical students to those with physical or developmental impairments. We have

enjoyed some amazing moments, like winning a state championship with my Unified Track and Field team. Before 2017 this would not have been possible for many of my friends as these programs didn't exist in our area. The feeling of being on a winning team was amazing for all the participants no matter their ability. We did it together. I have also been able to work with students with developmental delays in events like the Buddy Games, or the Buddy Walk.

Despite having autism I have a normal high school experience. I hang out with my friends, play sports, and occasionally watch other students compete in sports, and, of course, learn. My school feels like a very accepting place, especially for kids with developmental delays. Every day I see other students helping out those who have delays like autism and down syndrome. These students aren't just being friendly; they are also being great people as they have accepted those with differences in my school. I believe that these people helped me get better at opening myself up to everyone and making Wahconah feel like a second home.

Unified sports allow kids with all ability levels to participate in a high school level sport. The two programs that are offered at Wahconah are unified track and field and unified basketball. I have been with the unified basketball team since its inaugural season in 2018. I joined the track team during its second season, also in 2018. While on the Unified Track team, our team had won the Massachusetts state championship in 2019. It was the last time I got to play a sport with my older sister. On the basketball team, I was given a nickname: Tony "Magic" Marra for my love of the

game and skills. I am planning on becoming a sports broadcaster and playing sports has helped me find a new appreciation for all types of sports.

I also help off the court as well specifically with the Berkshire county ARC or BARC for short. The Buddy Games and Buddy Walk are two annual events hosted by BARC. The Buddy Games are a group of activities for young students with developmental delays to complete. Students from Wahconah volunteered to help with the games every year for the past 14 years. I have both played in and volunteered for the Buddy Games. The Buddy Walk is a walk through the town of Dalton, MA. The walk raises money for the BARC Down Syndrome Group and helps it fund events, such as the Buddy Games and a support group for families who have a child with Down Syndrome. I have volunteered multiple years, helping out wherever I can. BARC host several activity sessions throughout the year that I have also helped with or participated in such as swim, baseball, and teen and sensory groups.

I have good grades in all of my classes, and I have also been given the honor of being accepted into my school's chapter of the National Business Honor Society. This honor means that I'm on top of having good grades in my business classes. I have also done a great deal of good work outside of the school and in the community. I think that it is a big honor to be a part of the NBHS because it shows that I don't only have good grades, but that I also do a lot outside of the classroom. Those

who have developmental delays don't always have an easy time learning but autism hasn't slowed me down at all.

I always look at the positive side of life. One of the challenges I have for myself is to make at least one person's day better. I try to always make my family, friends, teachers smile when I am with them. Whether it is me telling a cheesy joke, telling them a story, or just smiling and telling them about my day, I try to do whatever it takes to make people smile. I feel that if I just made one person's day that it would just make my community and maybe the world a better place every day.

The biggest role models in my life have been my family. My parents taught me how to be independent and care for myself. My sister has been my biggest role model. She is the hardest worker I have ever seen in my life. She always tries her hardest. Even when something seems difficult she opens herself up to people that I would never have myself. She has also been one of my best advocates. If she ever hears about someone making fun of me or my older brother, my sister steps right in and stands up for us. My brother has also been a role model for me. He has severe autism, he often repeats a lot of sentences and statements that he remembers, which can make him stand out at times. Despite these challenges, my brother is very smart and he understands a lot more than most people realize. He is very good at math and he can run with the fastest people on the unified track team. He does need help from time to time and helping care for him has kind of given me a bigger responsibility in my family.

Autism is a big part of my life, but I haven't let it control me. I have used what I have to my advantage. My life has had its ups and downs, but I also have to overcome every single hurdle that is in front of me. I will always keep trying, no matter what. I know that grades matter but it's such a small portion of who I am and what I have to offer. My life experiences and drive will move me forward towards my goals in the future. I don't know what will come next but I will be ready for anything. Autism is just a small piece of my life, however, like the final piece of a puzzle it makes me who I am today.