

Gonzaga student champions advocacy for learning disabled

Pia Hallenberg/SR

It was in first grade that Madison Rose, 20, realized she was different.

She watched her best friend finish all the math homework – and the extra credit challenge – in the time it took her to barely finish the first two problems.

“I knew I was a different thinker,” Rose said.

For years she regarded herself as dumb and would just nod “yes,” when teachers asked if she understood an incomprehensible assignment. Finally Rose was diagnosed with ADHD – attention deficit hyperactivity disorder – plus short-term memory problems and dyslexia.

A tough diagnosis, but there was a silver lining.

“I also found out I was smart,” she said. “I tested in the 98th percentile for cognitive ability. Knowing I was smart changed everything.”

Now a sophomore at Gonzaga University, Rose is one of four student coordinators of Eye to Eye, a mentoring program that matches a college student who has a learning disability with a middle school student with a similar challenge.

“One in five has a learning disability,” Rose said. “It’s not overdiagnosed. It’s an epidemic.”

Eye to Eye mentors work with students at Garry and Glover middle schools using an art-based curriculum.

“It’s about teaching students to become self-advocates,” program coordinator Brandi Masters said. “One art project may focus on finding your strengths; another may be about which accommodations you wish you had.”

Some students may need extra time to take a test or to be allowed to take the test away from class, Masters said.

“Pairing them with college students shows them they can be successful,” she said. “And it gives a name to some of the challenges they are experiencing.”

On March 15, Rose facilitated a campus forum at which she and others shared stories about what it’s like to live with learning disabilities.

That wasn't the first time she took the stage as an advocate. As a high school student in Aurora, Colorado, Rose gave a TEDxYouth Talk – billed as a short talk on a great idea – about her life and the challenges she faced.

“That talk really changed me; it made me realize I could do something to help other people,” she said.

The sophomore is pursuing a degree in special education with elementary certification and a reading endorsement.

At Gonzaga, most of her textbooks are audio books, and she studies by listening.

“I have great understanding of what's going on,” Rose said. “I just can't show you on a piece of paper what it is.”

Through Eye to Eye, she has met many middle school students like herself. Last year, she mentored one who reminded her of her own struggles and the great need for better understanding of students with learning disabilities.

“Some students like me end up stuck in a general classroom where they are just called stupid,” Rose said.

Intervention and accurate assessment is needed as soon as students fall behind, she said. “There's no need to wait and see where it's going.”

Another focus of Eye to Eye is to teach students self-advocacy. It can be difficult for students to ask their professor for help, said Mark Derby, a Gonzaga professor of special education.

“Accommodations will only go so far,” Derby said. “At some point you have to reach out to the professor. In college you have to be your own advocate.”

Derby said Rose has increased awareness of learning disabilities on campus, and she has offered a lot of help to students around her.

“And she talks about the strong support system she had when she was younger,” Derby said. “She's a great self-advocate.”

Rose recently was named a 2016 Newman Civic Fellow in recognition for her work for students with learning disabilities. The award comes from Campus Compact, a Boston-based nonprofit that encourage social justice activism on college campuses.

She hopes connections that come with the honor will help her find housing on a return trip to Belize. She first visited the Central American country in high school and worked with learning-disabled students there.

Her dream is to be able to set up a special education school for teachers in Belize.

And after that?

“Ultimately, I want to become the U.S. secretary of education,” Rose said. “That way I can really affect change in the educational system.”