



Miles Abney '20 Engages St. Andrew's in Autism Awareness

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When Miles Abney '20 arrived at St. Andrew's in September 2017, it was her first time living away from her sister Peyton, who is 18 months younger and has autism spectrum disorder. Miles says the separation from her sister made her

feel as though "something [was] missing from [her] life, something that was so constant throughout." Miles realized that most St. Andrew's students know little about developmental disorders, and she set out to help her peers become more familiar with how such disorders impact people.

April is Autism Awareness month, and Miles seized this opportunity to broaden the community's understanding of autism by sharing her family's story and creating learning opportunities for students and faculty. Last year, Miles made announcements at every School Meeting during the month of April in which she shared information about autism. She was overwhelmed by the response of her peers, who "asked [her] questions, engaged, and wanted to know more."

This year, knowing her autism activism, Chaplain Jay Hutchinson asked Miles to organize a service about ASD during the month of April. Miles invited Health Center assistant Jennifer Sparks to speak. Earlier this year, the two connected over the "Autism Mom" sticker on Sparks' car. Sparks' son Dylan, aged 6, has autism, and Sparks and Miles shared their stories with one another. Miles reflected on their common bond, noting, "[Sparks] was someone that just understood that part of me, and we were able to bounce ideas off each other...and talk through things together." Sparks says that she views Miles as someone to look to for advice, since Peyton is older than Dylan.

On April 12, Sparks gave a Chapel Talk about her experiences raising Dylan, what it means to be an autism family, and the many ways in which autism manifests itself in individuals. "I felt she did an incredible job," Miles said of Sparks' talk. "She gave facts and made awareness, but also tied in her own story and how autism has affected her life." Sparks stressed that autism is truly a spectrum disorder, which Miles emphasizes as well: "Mrs. Sparks' son is drastically different from my sister, but we're still able to connect so much about our experiences." Sparks appreciates the number of students who have approached her to introduce themselves or asked questions about autism in the time since her talk.

Inspired by Miles and Sparks, five V Form students joined the Sparks family and Team "Dyl Pickle" at Autism Delaware's Walk for Autism in Newark on April 13, which broke records for attendance. Dylan served as the parade's grand marshal, waving the flag to start the walk. Miles was touched by her peers who came along, and she is grateful for her growing involvement in Delaware's autism community. Reflecting on how it all started with a bumper sticker, Sparks notes that this is the value of sharing our stories: "Your world gets bigger," she said, "and you discover a lot more people that are willing to come and help."