**Cary High’s Club Unify welcomes special needs students into the spotlight BY HENRY GARGAN OCTOBER 19, 2016 3:38 PM**

When Lucas Welch heard about Club Unify, a student-led group at Cary High School that encourages students with and without **disabilities** to spend time together and learn from one another, his first thought was that he already does that at home.

Welch’s younger brother has low-functioning **autism**. But Welch attended a meeting two years ago to see what the club was all about. Before his freshman year at Cary High was over, he found himself hanging out in the special education classrooms nearly every day.

High school isn’t always known as the most welcoming or **inclusive** place, which is partly why Welch said he and dozens of other students have found themselves drawn to Club Unify, a space where inclusivity and acceptance are stated goals.

“People come in with their guard up, but they see how welcoming it is, and it’s like, ‘Oh, well this is different,’ ” said Welch, now a junior. “It slowly becomes a second home to them.”

Jenice Bass, the club’s faculty sponsor, works primarily with students with Down syndrome and more social types of autism. She said Cary High School is especially open when it comes to offering her special needs students chances to participate in school athletics and perform with drama and music classes.

Club Unify began seven years ago and has **blossomed** from about six members then to about three dozen this year.

On a recent Wednesday morning, Club Unify members worked on a float for the school’s homecoming parade, which was Oct. 7. Nationwide, October is observed as Disability Awareness Month. Bass said she hoped the club’s **collaboration** on the float would highlight the school’s efforts to **integrate** special needs students into the general student body and offer them typical high school experiences.

The float’s theme was “The Lion King,” the club’s favorite movie. The room was loud and littered with cardboard. Students drew animals and worked on masks to wear as the float made its way through Cary.

On other occasions, Bass said, Club Unify members will drop by her class to eat lunch, play games, or even have a dance party with the special education students. But that **enthusiasm** doesn’t mean they don’t require a little coaching when it comes to interacting with those who have special needs.

“I tell them that they’re just like they are,” Bass said. “They like the same music, they like the same dance steps. They’re **typical** teenagers, but with a different kind of mind. They can do the same things anyone else in the school can do, but they just learn them in a different way.”

Welch, having grown up alongside someone with autism, said he often finds himself helping Bass make that point.

“They come in with the **mindset** that (special needs students) are completely different, that they need to make sure that they’re safe,” Welch said. “I find myself more often than not trying to help people **grasp** that concept of not parenting, almost, and just being kids together.”

Those bonds were evident when Jacob Hujar, a senior and one of Club Unify’s more active members, introduced Glendon Finley, a special needs student he befriended in the club.

Finley won a gold medal in the shotput at the county track meet last year and said he enjoys playing football and working out with the track team. He said he hopes to be a firefighter or a mail carrier, because he likes to help others.

Hujar spoke with pride about Finley. “He doesn’t like to brag, but he’s pretty good at doing flips, too,” Hujar said. “I’d hurt myself if I tried doing what he can do.”

Hujar said Club Unify has raised the profile of Cary High’s special needs students, even outside the club. He spends a lot of time working with the Special Olympics and said the school’s sports teams have served as a more natural environment for both groups of students to begin to see each other as peers.

“The benefit for everyone is realizing that people are different, but it’s OK to be different, and that you can bond over those differences,” Hujar said. “While someone might not be capable of what you’re capable of, they might have just as big of a personality, or even bigger.”

**Questions: ANSWER ON SEPARATE PAPER**

1. What is the purpose of Club Unify?
2. Who gets the most benefit from the club: students with or without disabilities? Explain your answer!
3. Why do you think more students have joined Club Unify over the past 7 years?
4. “Person first language” is when you write or speak about a person with disabilities, and you write or say the word PERSON before you say “with disabilities” or say their specific disability. For example, you would say “a student with autism” versus “an autistic student.” Why should people use person first language?
5. Find an example of NON-person first language in this article and write it down. Then write the sentence in person first language!