

As a parent, I am always looking for ways to stay involved in my children's education and I am always looking for ways to help them apply what they are learning in the classroom to the real world around them. When my daughters were in elementary school, I volunteered for several years in many classrooms (not just my children's classrooms) in a Masterpiece Art program in which I introduced students to famous artists, their work, and most importantly, their techniques. Elementary students that I had the privilege of mentoring, were able to take the technique demonstrated and bolster their creativity skills to create their own piece of art based off of that technique.

My older daughter, currently a Communities-2 student, is in her third year of the Communities program at ONHS. I have seen her grow in ways that a traditional classroom would not and could not have pushed her. She has developed communication skills in both the written, oral, and public formats. She has developed detailed research skills. And she has had the incredible opportunity to be a part of something larger in the community, giving back, and directly applying knowledge in a real-world setting instead of a virtual-created-mock setting (classroom).

My younger daughter is currently in her first year of high school and is a Communities-1 student. She is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. In the first few months of her involvement with the Communities program, I have seen a dramatic increase in her passion for learning, her oral communication skills, and her reading comprehension. She has finally been able to establish a passion for learning without getting bogged down with ways that Autism is not as compatible with the traditional classroom. She has begun to thrive, enjoys going to school every day, and feels accepted just as she is in this program. Finally, her overall grades for her classes are the absolute best they have ever been which demonstrates that she is able to apply what she is learning in Communities to her other classes.

As a single mom, it can be difficult to stay involved in your child's/children's education. Balancing home, work, children's schooling, and children's activities can be a lot to juggle. While I am not always available to participate in the authentic learning environments, the opportunities are always presented to me and I am able to participate in some events. However, the amount of teacher-parent communication that takes place allows me the opportunity to ask in-depth, detailed questions of my daughters to really have a strong role in what they are doing even if I cannot always participate physically. I feel I have a very good relationship with the Communities staff members and can share openly and freely with them; and, together, we are able to work as a team to provide the best individualized education possible.

When my daughters are excited about their education, it is infectious and I become excited about their education and supporting them wherever and whenever I can. Communities has given my daughters the opportunities to develop self-confidence and compassionate learning, apply their knowledge by giving back to the community, and developing their 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills which will allow them to be successful in whatever path they take as adults in this life. I am so blessed and privileged that my daughters are able to participate in this wonderful educational opportunity where the teachers are invested and excited to interact with students and help them grow on a daily basis.

-Carey Molinski