

A Day in the Life of a PBHAer...

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I wasn't looking forward to being a freshman all over again this year; my excitement at being in a world without curfews and over-protective parents was tempered by the usual host of things self-conscious seventeen year old girls worry about. I spent hours figuring out a new college wardrobe and trying to remember what making friends was like. Move-in day arrived quickly and I came to campus bright eyed, fully equipped with an over-stuffed suitcases and a bad haircut. Thankfully, the overwhelming amount of things to do and get done left little time for being self-conscious. It didn't take long for me to feel lost in a world of problems sets, practice, and midterms (which I quickly learned happen more than just in the middle of the semester). It was after yet another LifeSci exam that I tagged along with a couple friends who wanted to pick up some ice cream from an open house; it ended up being a PBHA study break. Though I didn't leave with a sundae that night, I'd stumbled into an organization that continues to serve as a place I can always count on and was introduced to an incredible program that has defined my freshman experience.

The Kids with Special Needs and Achievement Program, or KSNAP, runs out of two sites, but both involve mentoring students with special needs. The Condon school site meets on Tuesdays and works with kids with Asberger's and autism, helping them with their writing skills. The Quincy site involves developing confidence and social skills for kids with varying degrees of cerebral palsy through arts and crafts. Joining KSNAP is one of the best decisions I've made this year. Every Friday, regardless of how the week before has been, I get to leave everything behind with a quick ride on the T to Chinatown. We walk up to Josiah Quincy Elementary school and through hallways peppered with Chinese letters and pro-Obama paraphernalia, including a life size cut out, to Mr. Sacco's special needs classroom. Netanya, one of the students, greets us first, eager to show off the newest story she's written on the whiteboard. After a couple of minutes, the rest of the kids file into the colorful classroom. The way they greet us is probably one of my favorite parts of the whole experience; the pure love and excitement that we're met with, free of any expectations or conditions, is something I've never really felt before KSNAP, and I think that's what makes it the most fulfilling activity I've ever been a part of. Gio wheels over to Kim, another KSNAPista, and excitedly motions for her talk pad; Mr. Sacco puts it on her lap and she immediately begins tapping away at its animated buttons to announce that she has a surprise: she was going to be a big sister. Immediately everyone moved to high five and hug her, though Netanya insisted on exchanging a "fist bump" she'd been taught earlier.

Being around such genuinely happy and sweet kids is inspiring, and it's often hard to believe that anyone could fail to see how special they are. Yet kids with special needs are often marginalized at school and in their communities. So instead of helping the kids academically, we spend the rest of the afternoon building their social skills and confidence while working on arts and crafts together. While finger painting bird houses and making clay ancient artifacts, we get to encourage and show these students how

incredible they are. As the day come to a close, we arm everyone with layers of winter wear, help them into their wheelchairs, and go back through the colorfully papered halls to a little balcony playground where the rest of our time is spent pushing wheelchair races and playing tag until the buses come. Those three hours seem to go by quickly and every week feels as though outdoor time comes earlier every week, probably because Fridays at KSNAP are a time where I can be a kid and along the way show students that are otherwise ignored how amazing they are. Regardless of the week I've had before, I know I will always walk away with a thoroughly fulfilling experience every Friday.

My involvement in KSNAP and PBHA has defined my freshman year, and looking back, all of my summer jitters about fitting in at Harvard seem silly. PBHA volunteers are some of the most welcoming people on campus. They reached out not because of my image but merely on the grounds of a shared interest for community service. The upperclassmen in this organization guide me through my first year; the freshman I've met struggle with me, and the kids I work with encourage me every week. Being involved in any PBHA program means finding a group of truly genuine people that share your passion for service, something I found in KSNAP.