

# 2023 UNITY AWARD RECIPIENTS

## Grace Grell

Saint Cloud, MN

*Nominated by Polly Ann Grell*

Grace Grell is a college student graduating in May 2023 with a double major in Psychology and Communication Studies from St. Cloud State University (SCSU) in Minnesota. At three-years-old Grace was diagnosed with cancer of her optic nerves and optic chiasm and became completely blind. Through aggressive chemotherapy, she regained some sight, but remained legally blind. During her entire youth, she was a target for bullying. She was mocked by her peers; told she was dumb and couldn't do anything. Some teachers were not supportive. All she really needed in the classroom was assistive technology, but her peers didn't understand that using magnifiers and screen readers didn't mean she was less smart. It just meant she couldn't see well. The sad fact was that after years of this bullying, she started to believe some of what they said was true. When she graduated from middle school, she learned her tumors had sparked up again, so she started a second round of chemotherapy. Due to continued bullying in high school, she left after junior year to enter the Post Secondary Education Option. She completed senior year of high school concurrently with her first year of college at SCSU. When she started in-person classes at SCSU and pulled out the tools she needed to be successful such as magnifiers, a monocular, screen readers, (all tools the blind use), her new peers didn't point fingers or make fun of her. She has since prospered at college, has begun an internship, and volunteers as a coach. After graduation, Grace plans to provide therapy to families with children with disabilities and parents so they can all talk about disability and how it impacts them. Grace has received many awards and honors for her volunteerism and has been certified as a public speaker. She often speaks on the topics of bullying, inclusion, and people with disabilities.



Grace's goal is to create a more inclusive world for everyone.

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## Cara Montgomery

**Zeeland, MI**

*Nominated by Ann Mireles*

Cara Montgomery is a behavior interventionist and former special education teacher who has spearheaded the creation of a Unified Basketball Team within the middle schools of the West Ottawa Public Schools in Zeeland, Michigan. The team consists of students with disabilities along with near peer student athlete mentors who play together and compete against other Unified Teams in the area. This team has become an integral part of middle school and given these team members the opportunity to thrive. At a time when so much negativity permeates our country—acceptance and inclusion are becoming the norm within this school community. The shift in the school's culture has been palpable. Games have been a highlight of the school year with large crowds of students and community members attending. Recently, there was a “Staff vs. Unified” basketball game that fired up the entire student body. Cara is also responsible for the school's “Links Program”, which matches a near peer student to a student with a special need. These students attend class together, build relationships and encourage each other throughout their day. Cara saw the need for these programs that focus on building a positive culture and was determined to find a way to bring these projects to fruition.



## Peer Initiative — Leaders of Tomorrow (PILOT)

**Lake Charles, LA**

*Nominated by Lyndsey Young*

Peer Initiative - Leaders of Tomorrow (PILOT) is a student group at Sam Houston High School in Lake Charles, Louisiana, whose main mission is to ignite major social reform while utilizing the power of young minds in areas like bullying and mental health. Much of their advocacy work for bullying occurs during the month of October as they paint local elementary school windows with bullying prevention messages, work the local police office's bullying prevention walk, and host a bullying prevention theme during one of Sam Houston's football games. Within the PILOT organization, willing juniors and seniors apply and train to become peer mentors. Part of their training includes not only how to intervene in a bullying situation but how to offer emotional assistance to the target through confidential, one-on-one peer sessions. PILOT advertises these sessions around the school in addition to the other kindness-oriented messaging posters with which they color the walls of Sam Houston.



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## Akeelah Sanders

Marana, AZ

*Nominated by Shayla Watkins*

Akeelah Sanders is a 13-year-old student who is an avid volunteer in her Marana, Arizona community. Akeelah promotes her personal platform #KindLikeKeelah to inspire and celebrate goodwill by bringing attention to the impact of being kind. In addition to volunteering in her community, she promotes BRAVE (Building Respect and Values for Everyone) by speaking in elementary classrooms about bullying prevention and the importance of kindness.

Akeelah recognizes that something as small as a smile or kind gesture can change a person's day, and she epitomizes that idea. She could choose to be angry about being abused, neglected, separated from her biological brothers, and placed in the foster care system. Instead of focusing on that, she chooses to inspire kindness. She recognizes that if it weren't for the kindness of her adoptive parents, she would not be who she is today. The kindness that was shown to her is something she wants to share with the world.



## Chris Truffer

Arnold, MD

*Nominated by Shirley Jackson-Avery*

Mr. Christopher Truffer is a Regional Asst. Superintendent in the Anne Arundel County Public School system in Maryland. He is a true educational leader who facilitates and guides the bullying prevention efforts in the Arundel/Crofton/South River area. For the past five years, Mr. Truffer has chaired a district committee which focuses on bullying, specifically at the middle school level. This committee looks at data, national trends, and articles related to bullying. As a strong advocate of student voice, Mr. Truffer organizes meetings with students to ensure our committee hears directly from those we serve. His chairmanship has resulted in district wide Unity Day celebrations, School Kindness Cup Competitions, and Upstander Campaigns. Through his leadership, we are able to communicate important information regarding bullying prevention with principals and other school-based staff, ensuring systemic practices are being used with fidelity at all middle schools. Mr. Truffer's focus this year is on cyberbullying and educating parents on the healthy usage of social media.



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## M.E.A.N. Girls Empowerment

South Holland, IL

*Nominated by Brittny Denton*

M.E.A.N.—Manage Emotions, Avoid Negativity—Girls Empowerment's (MGE) is an organization whose mission is to empower girls from 8 to 18 to avoid negativity, build self-confidence, and pursue their goals. Their initiative is to increase self-love while addressing bullying with education and mentorship. The organization serves the Chicagoland area (South Holland, IL), and targets girls in high-risk communities on Chicago's south side and in the surrounding suburbs. A safe, supportive space is provided for girls who are dealing with bullying, aggression, harassment, violence, abuse, and related issues while empowering them to be advocates for change in their community. 98% of participants in MGE report an increase in self-esteem with more positive attitudes towards school and social relationships. The organization has committed over 3000 service hours in mentoring to over 150 girls via our programming and community outreach. Since its inception in 2014, MGE has worked with over 1500 girls in addition to retaining over 100 volunteers. Participants have attested that involvement in MGE has attributed to their college success because they gain the ability to process and manage emotions with confidence and a better understanding of life skills while they transition from adolescence to adulthood. In addition to the service provided to the program participants, the organization hosts quarterly parent workshops that focus on educating the adults in the household and the community.

This program is an asset to each community it serves due to the resources it gives and the incessant focus on the care of each participant as it relates to their health and education.

