

Richfield woman is speaking for herself, others

Partners in Policymaking teaches self-advocacy

BY ANDREW WIG
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Millie Cell's twin sister likes to put ketchup on her brownies, which is discouraged in their Richfield home. Or, sometimes, she'll sneak a midnight snack and get a stomach ache. Also discouraged.

More and more, Millie, 23, is keeping an eye on her sister, Dayna, who has non-verbal autism. Her ability as a caregiver has grown with her completion of a program called Partners in Policymaking.

Millie, who has mild autism, graduated from the program's most recent nine-month session in May, armed with a heightened ability to speak up for herself, and her sister.

Formed by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities in 1987, Partners in Policymaking teaches self-advocacy to people with a wide range of developmental disabilities, also educating parents with young children who have disabilities. Although the program is meant to help people advocate for policy change, Millie is already applying lessons from the program at home, according to her mother, Sue Cell.

"She's much more assertive. She has much more confidence," Sue said. "It's like she has taken this information and made it part of her. I mean, she's advocating all the time."

If it's not keeping the ketchup bottle out of her sister's hands at dessert time, it could be as simple as making sure her parents are using the correct terminology when referring to their children's condition. The politically correct way to refer to a person with a disability is to call them just that - "a person with a disability" Millie explains. For example, Millie has autism; she is not "autistic."

"She corrects us if we say something wrong," her mother said.

Millie enrolled in the program at the recommendation of a social worker in her day program, Eden Prairie-based Choice, which helps get people with disabilities into the workforce. Through Choice, Millie works at a Culver's restaurant, but has grander plans, hoping to possibly become a personal care care assis-

tant and take care of Dayna. She knows her parents won't always have that ability.

This, says Partners in Policymaking Executive Director Colleen Wieck, is the reason the program mixes parents of children with disabilities, with adults who have disabilities themselves. It allows them to look down the road, she explained, and see what life might be like when their children grow up.

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Partners in Policymaking participants meet classmates from diverse backgrounds, with a variety of developmental disabilities. Learning the ins and outs of policymaking, they also had the chance to meet state legislators. Millie, for instance, met with Linda Slocum, D-Richfield.

Last legislative session, the class learned about the "5% Campaign," which Gov. Mark Dayton signed into law this spring, giving care providers of people with disabilities and older adults a 5 percent rate increase. The hope is that the boost helps reduce staff turnover.

At home, Millie's concerns are more immediate.

Dayna requires 24-hour care and her mother admits her behavior can be a handful. Sometimes it's the autism, Sue said; sometimes, it's just run-of-the-mill acting-up.

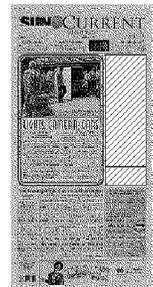
"And Millie knows the difference," she said.

With mild autism, Millie is in a unique position to keep an eye on her sister.

"I keep telling everybody that she's better with Dayna than all of us," Sue said. "She does so well with her."

Millie and Dayna were both diagnosed with autism at the age of three.

"It's been a wild ride," Sue said.



Hoping to contribute more to her sister's care, joining Partners in Policymaking was a major change for Millie.

"It was hard at first," she said.

Her first time in class was an overnight trip, which was also her first time staying away from her family. But she adjusted.

"You could see her ability to tell her story and communicate how it relates to policy," said Wieck, who helped found the program.

So often, Wieck said, people affected by disabilities don't know how much power they have.

"It's definitely a transformative experience for a person to come in, and often people don't know what services and supports are available. They don't know their rights. They don't know they can be a citizen lobbyist."

On top of her aspirations of becoming a PCA, Millie hopes to start a self-advocacy program at Choice with another client there. She knows nothing will happen overnight, though.

"Right now," she said, "I'm trying to take one step at a time."

Applications to join Partners in Policymaking's next session, beginning in September, are due July 11. Applications are accepted online at mngts.org. For more information, call Carol Schoeneck at 651-222-7409. She can also be reached at cschoeneck@mngts.org. Classes meet at the Minneapolis Airport Marriott, 2020 American Blvd. E., Bloomington.

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Joined by her mother, Sue Cell, left, Millie Cell holds her certificate of completion from Partners in Policymaking. (Submitted photo)