

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and members of the Educational and Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Mia LaPlante, I am a member of the UNE Womens Ice Hockey team but I am submitting this testimony as an individual in support of LD 2166.

A quick background on me. I am from Framingham, Massachusetts. I just graduated last spring from Hobart and William Smith colleges with a bachelors in sociology and I am currently attending UNEs Master of Social Work program. My end goal is to be a school social worker or work for the child welfare system. The past two summers I have had the privilege to work for a special education program in my town. We work with a wide range of differently abled students from Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD), behavioral disabilities, down syndrome and so much more.

So, when I decided to join the UNE womens hockey team and learned that we would be working with team impact, I was thrilled. I had heard of many other teams doing the same thing and the kids they meet have left a lasting impression. Sami is no different. From the first day we met Sami she was a ball of energy. Since then we have had lunch with Sami at her school, we have attended her dance recital, we went apple picking with her and Sami has attended nearly every single game of ours. When we say Sami is on our team, we mean it. She does everything but skate with us. Although we were more than happy to get her on skates this December for our annual skate with Santa.

Sami has brought a level of joy to our team that I cannot begin to describe. We love Sami and Sami loves us...we think. Having more people like Sami on our campus would not just make her happy, it would make everyone happier. It is the biggest misconception that people with IDD or ASD are vastly different from the rest of us. That couldn't be farther from the truth. Sami's down syndrome may make it harder for her to be independent but that doesn't stop her from trying, as you heard her say. She wants to

be independent and she works hard everyday to accomplish that goal. We *all* have goals and we *all* work hard to accomplish them. Why should it be any different for Sami?

While I live in Massachusetts, I have family roots in Waterville and have been coming to Maine all my life. Everytime I drive over the Piscataqua Bridge, the 'hairy' bridge as I used to call it as a kid, I am met with a sign that says "Welcome to Maine; Worth a visit, Worth a Lifetime". This is my visit. While I love Maine, this is not my forever home. This is Sami's life. Maine is Sami's lifetime. She wants to go to UNE. She wants to live in Biddeford and there is no reason why she shouldn't be able to live out her dream, just like I am living out mine.

Thank you for listening and please support LD 2166. Not just for Sami but for kids like her all over the state of Maine.