

March 3rd, 2025

Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Re: LD 46 An Act to Establish a Grant Program to Increase Postsecondary Educational Opportunities for Students with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities or Autism Spectrum Disorder

Chair Rafferty, Chair Murphy, and Distinguished Members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

My name is Brooke Helgesen. I am a senior at Thornton Academy High School. "The world is my oyster" and my opportunities are endless. I am on top of the world. My future is promising. I am embraced with hope and beliefs that I will own a practice and care for patients with IDD, autism, Down Syndrome, and anybody else in between. I had the opportunity to apply and get accepted to the college of my choice. Thankful for the Presidential Scholarship, I will be attending Saint Joseph's College of Maine for nursing. As you know, Sami does NOT have similar freedom. Her opportunities are determined by individuals such as yourselves. YOU are in charge of your decision making. YOUR decisions are in charge of Sami's opportunity. Her options are limited and it is due to funding.

Sami is supportive. She is a forgiving, free-spirited, reliable, and dependable 17 year old teenager. Sami is also an intelligent, athletic, and determined student at my high school. I know of her amazing qualities because of Special Olympics and Best Buddies.

Sami has worked through multiple trials and tribulations, persevered, and is also a top student in her class of almost 400 students. If Sami's transcripts were adjacent to mine, her opportunities would match that is, until you read the fine, yet BOLD print, of her different abilities flashing in neon lights. Sami should have my freedoms. She deserves to fulfill her dream. She deserves financial aid and presidential scholarships. She deserves to have equal opportunities. This struggle should NOT continue for any student.

I have a conventional teenage friendship with Sami; a best friend, a soul sister, a "my person" type of relationship. We meet up in the halls, tease each other, tell jokes, talk about boys, and dance like nobody is watching. Sami brightens my day, she is infectious. We talk about our favorite music, laugh, and make plans for lunch. Thankful to Special Olympics (funding), we have unified art and gym together and also play 3 unified sports; (volleyball, basketball, and bocce) however, our friendship is not confined to the walls at school. Sami and I do typical girly teenage things together; shopping, manis, pedis, movies, sports games, beaches, matching fairy tinsel in our hair, restaurants, homecomings and proms- our list is infinite. We love to be tourists and share experiences, like seeing Dancing With The Stars, swimming with the Dolphins, and going to museums. Nothing gets in our way- except...funding.

Sami's Down Syndrome is NOT a barrier for her, but funding is! Down Syndrome DOES NOT define Sami, but labels and education do! I challenge you to spend some time with Sami and

her compassion will teach you to be more understanding and empathetic. Your vote would come naturally.

Please hear her, hear us; for we need you on our side. On behalf of all the Samis, I am here to plead for your support. We can't do this alone. Please help Sami get through college, so she can work in my practice some day. I promise you wouldn't get better care or feel more heard.

March is National Down Syndrome month and a perfect time to reflect on education. Sami's extra chromosome just makes her EXTRAordinary and we are blessed. In closing, I ask for your support and approval today to move forward with LD 46, so all students have the freedom to move forward.

I appreciate your time.

Respectfully,  
Brooke Helgesen

