

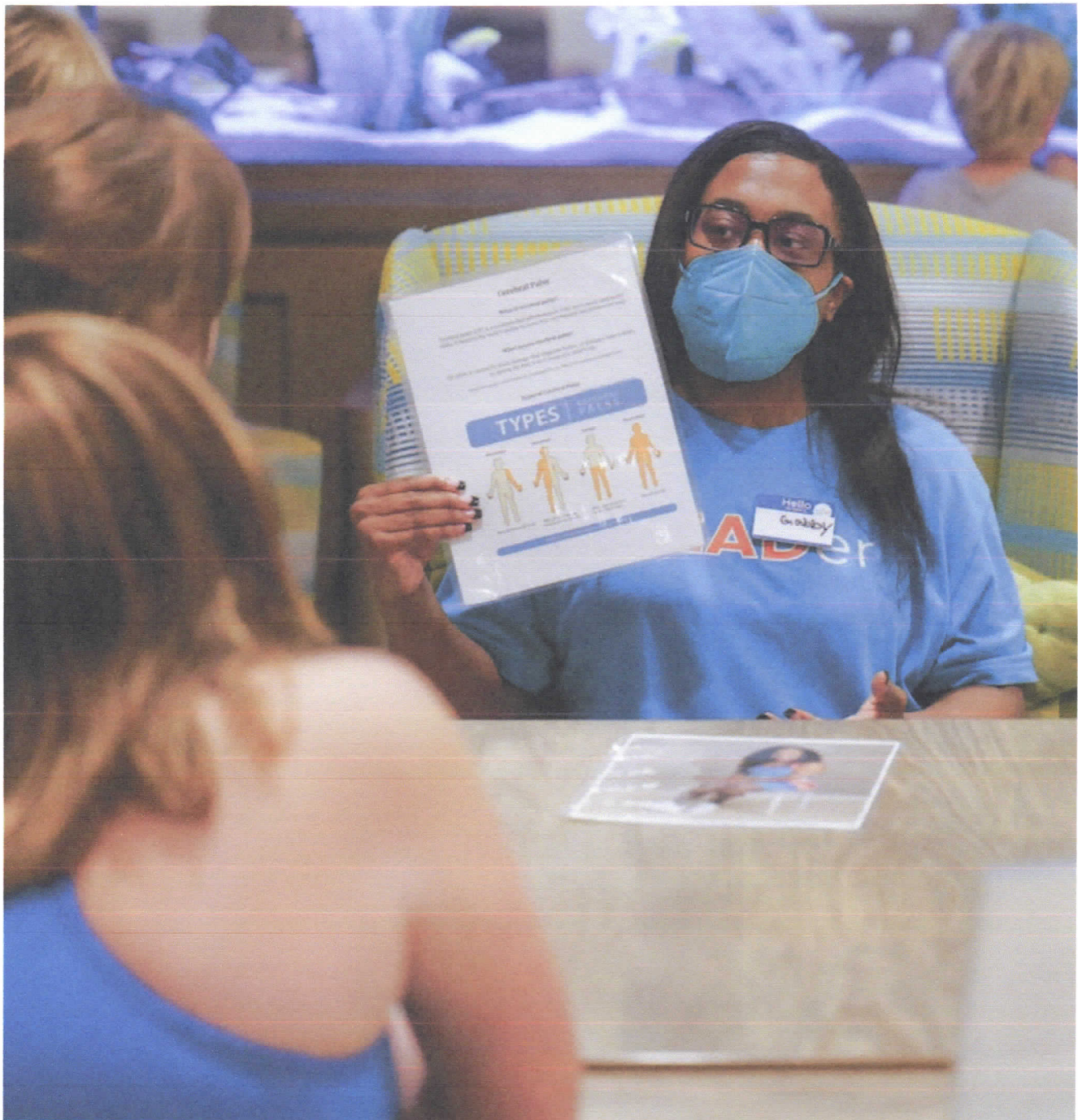
ADVOCACY

Nonprofit takes on barriers that disabled people face

To Be Like Me teaches lessons on kindness, compassion



To Be Like Me volunteers Emma Vaughn (left) and Remi Nowak played a ball-in-a-maze puzzle game in the sensory processing disorder room during a community open house last month at the Tolleson Family Activity Center in Dallas. (Photos by Shafkat Anowar/Staff Photographer)



Gabbie Harris talked about cerebral palsy during a community open house for To Be Like Me, a Dallas-based nonprofit, which works with area schoolchildren.

By **LESLIE BARKER**
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Michael Susens is 25, a strong and serious-looking young man who likes model trains

and video games. He has his own YouTube channel and hopes someday to make a living reviewing and playing video games.

Meanwhile, he is eager to let people know who else he is.

“I have Asperger’s syndrome,” he said at a recent community open house for To Be Like Me, a Dallas-based nonprofit with a mission to break down barriers that disabled people face. “I can be socially awkward. Sometimes someone with autism will have poor social skills. I for one do not like loud noises at all. I use headphones.”

He stood in front of a room designed to look like the inside of an airplane. Minutes earlier, To Be Like Me founder and executive director Hollis Owens played the role of the flight attendant.

She walked up and down the narrow aisle, loudly (to be heard over a recording of a crying baby) reminding “passengers” to be sure to buckle their seatbelts and put their luggage in the overhead bins, and thanking them for choosing Fly Kind Airlines because, “We know you have a choice.”

After a few minutes of giving instructions and confusion, she asked, “Where are we going?”

Nobody knew the answer, although when the session began, she had told them: Chicago.

“This is a sensory processing challenge,” said Owens, who lives in Richardson. “Sometimes, sights and sounds are too much. This is what many people go through every day. Maybe you’ve seen them holding their hands over their ears, or rocking back and forth. These are signs of being overstimulated.”

Susens knew the chaotic flight simulation would have been uncomfortable for him. So he waited outside until Owens gestured him in. He walked to the front of the room, paused for a moment and then asked, “How was that experience?”

“Overwhelming,” someone answered.

“Good word,” he said.

Then he asked, “When I came into this room, did you think I had autism?”

Some participants shook their heads; others quietly said no. (Not surprising, Owens said later: 75% of disabilities are invisible.)

“I’m hard-working,” said Susens, who lives in Dallas. “I’m honest. People with disabilities can do things, even though we may be awkward and try to fit in.”

Sharing obstacles

Susens is one of 25 LEADers (Leaders in Education and Advocacy for Disabilities) at To Be Like Me, representing 10 disabilities or differences: autism and sensory processing, mental health challenges, deaf or hard of hearing, speech and communication challenges, chromosome differences, mobility impairments, vision impairments, learning differences, limb differences, invisible disabilities.

Some are former patients of Owens, a physical therapist. For years, they and other patients with disabilities or differences would tell her of obstacles they faced in restaurants, school, airplanes and doctors’ offices.

“I found myself on the phone all the time talking to teachers, to doctors, to people who worked at restaurants,” she said.

That led to starting To Be Like Me, which invites schoolchildren to come to its two facilities on twice-weekly field trips and learn what it means To Be Like Susens. Or To Be Like Blake Lindsay of Plano, who has been blind since he was a baby. Or To Be Like TJ Smelko of Richardson, whose cochlear implants opened a world of music to him. Or To Be Like Jonathan Rizzo, 15, of Richardson, who is in a wheelchair.

When COVID-19 shut everything down, the organization went virtual, reaching more than 2,000 students and teachers across the country. Field trips are now in person, but LEADers continue to be available for virtual presentations and interactions. Online lessons on the website, which has had more than 30,000 hits, are free. Those about mental health have been the most popular, Owens said.

“You never know what someone is going through or what they have been through,” she said. “It’s always important to be kind.”

Developing empathy

Although everyone can learn from the To Be Like Me experience, fourth- and fifth-graders “are great ages for empathy,” she said. “It’s our hope that students learn about how to be a good friend and includer, someone who spreads kindness and compassion. Getting to know people with differences and disabilities gives them an opportunity to hear their stories.”

Interacting with the LEADers, she said, breaks barriers.

“We have an opportunity to make a difference in the future of our communities,” Owens said. “These students are future lawmakers, business owners, architects, health care providers and community members.”

The effects of the field trips linger, she said. Thirty days after their students' experience, 95% of teachers reported seeing positive changes in such areas as kindness, group efforts, increased attention, positivity, behavior and taking responsibility.

'I'm me'

At the July open house, Lindsay, who is 58, told those gathered that his blindness hasn't stopped him from marrying, from working as a broadcaster and banker, from becoming a motivational speaker or from enjoying the outdoors.

"I have a good time showing people they don't need to feel sorry for us," he said.

He shared the session with Smelko, 35, who has a YouTube channel called TJ's Sign Language Cafe.

"I've become addicted to music," Smelko said. "It brings joy to my life and a smile to my face."

Yes, he's not like everyone else, which is fine with him.

"Being different is nothing to be sorry about," he told the roomful of visitors. "I'm happy with my life."

Smelko's mom, Debbie, is president of the nonprofit's board of directors. Since TJ became involved with To Be Like Me, she said, he's more confident. Plus, he has a sense of serving and of being part of his community. And being around other LEADers has shown him he's not the only person who has challenges to overcome.

At the open house, Lauren Taylor, 45, of Denton, who works at the University of North Texas and is in a wheelchair, encouraged her audience to "ask before helping us."

"Because there are few things we can do for ourselves, we like to do them for ourselves," she said.

LEADer Kathleen Gamso, 25, told how Williams syndrome causes her to have a good memory and good hearing, but also to learn things more slowly than most people.

"We want to live in a world where people don't treat us differently and aren't afraid of us," said Gamso, who lives in Dallas. "I'm me. And I can accomplish whatever I want in this world."

Leslie Barker is a Richardson freelance writer and former staff writer for The Dallas Morning News.

How to help

To schedule a field trip, volunteer, donate or learn how to become a LEADer, or for more information on To Be Like Me, email hello@tobelikeme.org or go to the website, tobelikeme.org.

Twitter: @ohlesliebarker