

The Webster's dictionary definition of a friend is: "One who is attached to another by affection; one who entertains for another sentiments of esteem, respect and affection, which lead him to desire his company, and to seek to promote his happiness and prosperity."

We all know the importance of friendships. I have been very fortunate to have many amazing friends throughout my life. One of the hardest things that I had to navigate when Eli was young was that he did not get invited to play dates and sleepovers and did not have any friends. It can be hard for any child to make friends and be accepted for who they are. And when you have different and challenging behaviors and don't have the same interests as your peers, friendships are even harder to make.

When Eli was young, he didn't seek friends. He was quite happy being by himself or sitting on the outside of a play group. However, that all changed when he got to middle school. He became quite the extrovert and began to actively seek friendships. He has been blessed with making friends over the years (no small feat for a child on the spectrum). In particular, he has made some wonderful friends that have been by his side since 6<sup>th</sup> grade. They will both be leaving for college in August, but I have no doubt that the bond they have created will persist their entire lives. Both of his BFFs wrote their college application essays about how Eli has impacted their lives and I wanted to share their words.

...Eli became my best friend. He was not only my person, but also someone that saved me. It is difficult to describe Eli in words because I do not think they do him justice. He is compassionate, hilarious, empathetic, and above all, a good human. Instant connections are rare, but it was inevitable with Eli. He has helped me care so much for others and look past surface qualities. Although he may not know it, he has helped me grow as a person immensely. I have learned that living a glass-half-full lifestyle is way more enjoyable, that patience truly is a virtue, and many random facts such as the names of all 94 exits on Interstate 64. ~ Claire

...Because of my friendship with Eli, I have become a happier and healthier person. His positive outlook on life is infectious and it led me to reevaluate my negative feelings and made me realize I needed to share how I was feeling. It's been five years since I met Eli, and we are still friends. I know if I'm having a bad day, talking to him will help me feel better. Eli has taught me how to love others deeper, and I truly believe he has made my heart bigger. No other person in my life has ever had such a deep and meaningful effect on me. ~ Libbie

My wish for all of you is that you have friendships with people who support and love you this deeply. I also wish that you will join Eli, his friends, and my family by donating and/or participating in the Autism Society Central VA 5K and Family Fun Day. All funds raised provide much needed support to families and individuals like Eli living with autism, and all the money stays in the greater Richmond area. I hope you will consider supporting Team bELIeve in one of the following ways:

1. Make an online **donation** to the ASCV (Jennifer Barnum- Team bELIeve): [Jennifer Barnum - ASCV 5K & Family Fun Day \(runsignup.com\)](https://www.runsignup.com/RunSignup/US/2020/ASCV%205K%20&%20Family%20Fun%20Day)
2. Join Team bELIeve on May 20 at Crump Park: [ASCV 5K & Family Fun Day Online Registration \(runsignup.com\)](https://www.runsignup.com/RunSignup/US/2020/ASCV%205K%20&%20Family%20Fun%20Day)

Love,

Jennifer & Nathan (Eli's #1 bELIevers)

