

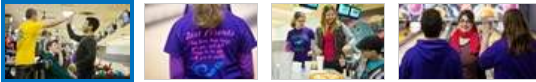
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CHRIS MACHIAN/THE WORLD-HERALD

Earl Montes, left, congratulates Ariel Alai after his turn bowling at West Lanes.

MAKING HUMAN CONNECTIONS

Getting to know you

By [Erin Grace](#) / World-Herald columnist

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They high-fived after each bowling try — gutter ball or strike.

They made many, many, many trips to the snack bar.

They shared nachos and a lot of laughs and the experience of being a teenager: Eating junk food.

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Flirting some and joshing a lot. Fitting in with friends who've got your back, who know your quirks and accept you anyway because you accept them.

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In a way, there was nothing special about these 19 Central High students passing a few hours at West Lanes near 72nd and Dodge.

But they had trained for this. They spent the day before rehearsing what it would be like to rent shoes and buy fries, how to congratulate your teammate and not to dwell on defeat.

This outing was less about bowling and more about making human connections.

Welcome to Central Mixer. It's a social skills club catering to students who have struggled to fit in. Some club members deal with impairments that are not always obvious, such as autism, a developmental disorder characterized by communication difficulties.



Erin Grace

Autism symptoms and abilities can range greatly. One 16-year-old club member, for example, did not speak for the first six years of his life. He speaks just fine now, but with an earnestness and a higher-pitched voice that endear him to friends and make him a target for bullies.

That's kind of how it is with the others. They look like your everyday teenager but have a tic or a habit that to peers can seem strange. And in the sometimes-mean years of high school, that can be terribly isolating.

The day I visited, many of the students who were meeting in a third-floor classroom at Central described being bullied. Some coped by clamming up to avoid becoming a target.

"I barely talked to people," said Jaylin Dixson, a junior.

"You were not the only one," said David Gooch, also a junior.

They are academically able enough to hold their own in the classroom, including honors classes. Yet an outing as innocuous as a football game or bowling presents social tripwires.

A pair of young teachers recognized this last year when students they worked with complained of loneliness.

Here, among some 2,400 students, they had no one to eat lunch with or talk to in the hallways or hang with on a weekend.



Stephanie Goodrich

Stephanie Goodrich, a resource teacher, and Samantha Zickefoose, a speech-language therapist, decided to act. At a high school with clubs for chess, Dungeons and Dragons, Harry Potter and fishing, they launched Mixer.

They intentionally schedule monthly outings on Friday evenings, so Mixer members could have weekend plans like their peers. They hold club meetings the day before, to prepare students who might be confounded, for example, by crowded bleachers.

When the club launched last year, seven members signed up. Now there are 30.

Goodrich and Zickefoose recruited other teachers and a friendly security guard to help. They held fundraisers to keep events affordable.



And they stuck to two basic rules: Pass all your classes. And stick with the other students in the club instead of hanging around with

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Samantha Zickefoose

with the other students in the club instead of panging around with teachers.

“Teachers with teachers, students with students,” is Goodrich's mantra.

Students are there to socialize with each other.

The teachers' role is to serve as guardian angels. They head off potential conflicts, such as when the sole cook at West Lanes got bombarded with orders, and the Mixer teens wanted to check and recheck to see if their burger was ready yet.

Goodrich reminded them the cook was busy and said they'd be told when their food was ready.

Club members are told to treat each other the way they would like to be treated.

When a blond 16-year-old told me some peers cruelly called him “SpongeBob,” a fellow club member piped up:

“There IS a resemblance.”

Goodrich stepped in.

“That hurt his feelings,” she told the other boy.

“Sorry, man,” he said.

I asked the teachers why there needed to be a special club to teach this kind of thing. Goodrich said social events present key learning opportunities to explore what she called “the hidden curriculum.”

Take football games. Before the club went to a game last fall, Goodrich taught bleacher etiquette: You have to move aside when someone wants to get by.

One time last year, a member wanted to go to a football game on his own.

But once he got to the stadium, he panicked. What would he do inside? Where would he sit?

The teenager spent the game outside the gate, alone and apart from the action.

That's where Mixer comes in.

“We're really trying to prevent anxiety,” Goodrich said. And to prevent misunderstanding and potential conflict.

But it's hard to teach social skills in a vacuum, Zickefoose said. What you need is the real-world practice and friends who boost your confidence.

Just ask these teens why they like the club.

“It's a chance for people who don't have friends to make some new friends,” said Matthew Ford.

“You get to make friends,” said Jazmine Valverde.

“The one thing I like about this is friendship,” said Gooch.

“We make new friends,” said Ariel Alai.

At West Lanes, 19 friends lined up for shoes and snacks. They rooted for each other. They laughed at each other's jokes and took in stride each other's habits — the constant

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dancing-drumming-air-guitar-strumming of one friend, the constant banter of another.

They went nuts when a third friend, who has tremor and seizure disorders, nailed a strike.

Andrew Reed, a math teacher, watched the fun.

“This is one of the most important clubs at Central,” he said.

How could you disagree?



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Erin is a columnist who tries to find interesting stories and get them into the paper. She's drawn to the idea that everyday life offers something extraordinary.

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Michelle Leo · Bellevue University

Awesome. What a lovely story. Special teachers helping special kids. How perfect.

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Bobette Colgrove

What a wonderful story, and what great teachers who not only recognized students' differences, but actually did something about it that was beyond their responsibility as teachers! It makes me proud to be part of this profession. I am so happy for these students and teachers! We need more positive stories like this and less negative stories in journalism today! Thank you Omaha World Herald!

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Alma Ramirez-Rodgers · Works at University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Thank you for the story!

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Great story!

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Eric O'Brien · [★](#) Top Commenter · Department of English at Creighton University

High-functioning autism often allows children to succeed in the classroom and struggle in the halls. I applaud these teachers for helping kids learn social skills and thank this newspaper for publicizing their efforts.

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