WELCOME LETTER FROM THE CO-FOUNDER

Dear Colleagues and Friends,

A giant thank you from all of us at Beyond Differences for being our partner and bringing Know Your Classmates 2017 to your school and community! It takes only one person – dedicated and visionary – to take the first step in ending social isolation and creating a culture of belonging for everyone.

Without sounding too immodest, this back-to-school initiative may well be one of the most forward-thinking, creative and sensitively written curricula to pass through your school’s doors.

It was created and designed by teachers for teachers to address the challenge of how we, as educators, help middle school youth become more self-aware about their own family’s identity, traditions and culture while learning acceptance, inclusion and respect for their classmates as well.

In other words, the simple values that guide us to lead empathic, compassionate and just lives.

We believe that, together, we can inspire youth to end social isolation through awareness and leadership training and help them become tomorrow’s adults, teachers and community leaders. Together, we can create a culture of belonging for everyone.

Beyond Differences was founded in 2010 by my husband, Ace Smith, and me after the unexpected passing of our daughter, Lili Rachel Smith, who was a 15-year-old high school freshman and died in her sleep. Lili was born with Apert Syndrome, a rare cranial-facial anomaly. She experienced social isolation in middle school, suffering silently while the children who had been her friends all throughout elementary school were no longer including her in their weekend and after school plans.

As a close family, we saw the devastating effects being left out had on Lili. We taught her self-confidence, keeping her spirits high and her life full and busy, reminding her that middle school was just a few short years in her long and beautiful life. We promised her things would get better as soon as she was a bit older.

Unfortunately for Lili, she didn’t live long enough to experience new friends and social acceptance. Her passing was, as I said, unexpected and heartbreaking for all who knew her.

After Lili’s passing, and newly aware of just how left out she had felt during middle school, a group of her former classmates approached us with an idea to honor her memory. They chose a rarely, never before talked about subject: social isolation.

They asked our blessings and, of course we said yes. With fierce commitment and determination, they helped to found Beyond Differences as a student-led social justice movement, a brilliant decision in retrospect, as students are the ones who – when taking positive action at their own school – have the power to make “inclusion the new cool.”

In the early days of Beyond Differences, just seven years ago, the idea that a middle or high school student could feel “socially isolated” but never outwardly teased or bullied was unheard of.

Today, there is research – medical, psychological and academic – that proves social isolation among adolescents is rampant and can lead to adverse medical, emotional and academic outcomes.

Social isolation starts very young with children in first, second, and third grade. Children this age are already exploring their gender identity, ethnic identity and cultural backgrounds. They are forming bias and prejudice. They are noticing differences but may not yet have the language or the skills to appreciate how to relate to others.

What happens if we do not address their early questions and explorations and, in turn, offer youth the insights, skills, tools and positive student mentoring they need to connect with one another and accept differences? The most egregious and frightening possibility is a socially isolated youth grows to become a socially isolated adult who commits community violence.

A less but more prevalent reality are adults who are still carrying with them the labels and experiences they had in middle or junior high school when they felt marginalized, not accepted, or lonely because of perceived or real differences.
I hope we never again have to read about horrific and violent current events perpetrated on our society by someone described as socially disconnected and a “loner.” As unrealistic as that is, I know we can decrease the likelihood of depression, self-harm and suicide. And while we cannot fix all mental health issues, limit access to guns, nor change the outcome of presidential elections with one small non-profit, we can impact millions and millions of children's lives every day at school through innovative curricula like Know Your Classmates.

We are so happy that you are the one doing something about it!

Mobilizing youth through grassroots student leadership will help end social isolation. Our money is on the youth. It’s simple: students listen to other students.

It will not take long. We are on our way!

Thank you for joining with us and bringing Know Your Classmates to your school. Together, we will make it cool to include.

A NOTE OF GRATITUDE TO THE ISLAMIC NETWORKS GROUP

Know Your Classmates began as a collaboration of love and respect between the Islamic Networks Group (ING) and Beyond Differences. ING is a non-profit organization based in the San Francisco Bay Area, with affiliates in 20 states, whose mission is to counter prejudice and discrimination against American Muslims by teaching about their traditions and contributions in the context of America’s history and cultural diversity. Know Your Classmates grew from the national Know Your Neighbor program, launched at the White House in 2016, which was started by an interfaith coalition of 15 civil rights and faith-based organizations. ING runs the grassroots interfaith campaign of Know Your Neighbors. Beyond Differences is honored to continue its work with ING as both our organizations envision a world in which people of diverse backgrounds are understood and respected. To learn more about their organization, visit www.ing.org.

SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR EDUCATORS

We wish to thank all the of the talented educators who worked on this curriculum: Know Your Classmates creator, Air Gallegos, our editors: Grace Alexander, Sally Kuhlman, Sheri Louis, Louise Malandra, Rosie Gonzalez, and Kelly Knoche. We also wish to thank all our partner schools and our Education Advisory Council for supporting this curriculum and making “inclusion the new cool at school!” Special thanks to our amazing high school Teen Board of Directors in the North Bay, East Bay and Portland for working tirelessly to advocate for change in middle schools.

Together, our vision is to create a world where every child is accepted, valued, and included by their peers no matter what their difference.

Laura Talmus
Co-founder and Executive Director
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P.S. If you like this Teacher’s Guide (Abridged Version) but would like more detailed explanations of Lesson Plans and materials needed, please go to our website (http://knowyourclassmates.org/teacherguide) and download the full curriculum at no cost. And, we are excited to announce that we are launching our first-ever online learning platform for teachers through a generous grant from Cornerstone OnDemand Foundation. You can sign up at teachingready.org
1. WHAT IS BEYOND DIFFERENCES?

Beyond Differences is a student-led social justice movement and the only organization dedicated to ending social isolation by empowering students to become activists and change the culture of middle school.

We are:

**Focused on social isolation.** While other organizations are focused on bullying after the damage to children has been done, we focus on the positive and prevent bullying instead of reacting to it. We are the only organization raising national awareness through public relations campaigns, on campus and online, about adolescent social isolation, a preventable public health crisis.

**By students for students.** Our approach is rooted in our belief that this generation of youth has the power to change the world, starting with how they treat each other at school and online. Students have shown that, when given the tools, they will stand up for others as empathetic and caring activists, not passive bystanders. We engage directly with these leaders of tomorrow and show them how to influence their classmates, making the culture at school better for the whole community. They are making “inclusion the new cool in school.”

**Based on three Positive Prevention Initiatives.** A flexible set of options designed by teachers and tested in schools since 2010 that work in any education environment. The three initiatives wrap around the school year with **Know Your Classmates** in the fall, **No One Eats Alone** in the winter, and **Call It Out** in the spring. Each initiative includes original curriculum, a national awareness day event, and student leadership training.

2. WHAT IS SOCIAL ISOLATION?

Social isolation is the feeling of being left out, lonely, or invisible; it is a feeling of being “different” for any number of reasons, and not accepted by one's peers or classmates. There are students in schools all over the United States who quietly suffer from loneliness and isolation every day. Beyond Differences focuses on middle school grades because adolescence is a perfect time emotionally and cognitively to create student awareness and commitment to one's classmates.

3. WHY SOCIAL ISOLATION? DON’T SCHOOLS HAVE BIGGER PROBLEMS SUCH AS BULLYING AND VIOLENCE?

We believe that much of the bullying and violence in our schools can be addressed by treating the underlying causes. Since 2010, Beyond Differences has presented to over 20,000 middle school students in dozens of schools, and we have found the problem of social isolation to be universal across urban and suburban communities. There is a higher propensity for social isolation among children who identify as multi-cultural, multi-religious and English language learners.

By reducing social isolation, we believe we can help change the culture of middle school to one in which students thrive academically, emotionally and physically.
FAqs about know your classmates

1. WHAT IS KNOW YOUR CLASSMATES?

Know Your Classmates is a Positive Prevention Initiative for middle school children that includes an original curriculum, a national awareness day, and student leadership training. It teaches children how to nurture healthy and open relationships among classmates and counter prejudice and discrimination by learning about their own identity and the identities of their peers.

Know Your Classmates consists of three components:

• **Original Curriculum:** 8 stand-alone lesson plans with accompanying worksheets, links to suggested videos, and fully scripted PowerPoints that will guide you and your class through each lesson. These lessons do not have to be delivered sequentially, but can be chosen according to your interests, what is happening in the news, or in response to the needs of your community.

• **Know Your Classmates Day:** a fun school-wide event that takes place on the same day at schools across the country! Hundreds of thousands of students get to know something new about one another and create an amazing public art piece that displays what they learned!

Know Your Classmates day is student led. Beyond Differences provides a free tool kit filled with materials for the event. The national awareness day can be held as the culmination of a series of lessons, as a kick-off to beginning the lessons, or as a stand-alone event.

On Know Your Classmates Day students are reminded of the importance of creating an inclusive community where we will not be scared by one another’s differences but are willing to communicate positively and learn from one another.

• **Student Leadership Training:** additional lessons that guide students through the planning, preparation, and leading of the Know Your Classmates Day. Your student leadership group can continue building their skills and inspire their classmates and peers to create a culture of belonging in their school by leading Beyond Differences’ winter and spring Positive Prevention Initiatives, No One Eats Alone and Call It Out.

2. WHY SHOULD WE DO KNOW YOUR CLASSMATES?

Know Your Classmates happens in the beginning of the school year and is a starting place for changing the culture of your middle school to one where all students feel included, valued, and accepted by their peers.

Know Your Classmates works because of three simple ideas:

• **Students can improve their own communities.** Through healthy and open relationships, students can make a tangible change in their community, challenging themselves and others to understand and accept each other’s differences in order to combat social isolation.

• **Inclusive communities are stronger communities.** Inclusive school communities create happier and more successful students while also empowering youth.

• **Inclusion helps prevent bullying.** Social isolation is oftentimes the precursor to bullying. School communities with a culture of inclusion have far fewer instances of bullying.

3. HOW MUCH MONEY WILL THIS INITIATIVE COST YOUR SCHOOL?

The program is provided free of cost. All the resources come in our Activity Boxes, which we will ship to you at no charge to your school. You can request an Activity Box online at [www.knowyourclassmates.org](http://www.knowyourclassmates.org).
EDUCATOR LETTER FROM AIR GALLEGOS

WELCOME TO KNOW YOUR CLASSMATES!

As educators, we know that negative peer-to-peer behaviors affect youth inside and outside of school. Know Your Classmates (KYC) is a curriculum that was written by teachers who value diversity, inclusivity, and believe that social emotional learning is of the utmost importance. The Know Your Classmates curriculum was created primarily for middle school grades to nurture healthy and open relationships among classmates from the moment school starts in the fall. It is comprised of teacher lesson plans and a student leadership unit. The curriculum is a supplement to the national awareness day sponsored by Beyond Differences™. Know Your Classmates is about supporting you and your students in exploring identity, recognizing stereotypes, and embracing differences.

We know that compassionate and committed teachers want to take the time at the beginning of the school year to discuss with their students issues of connection, identity, stereotyping and inherent bias. As teachers, we know that our students need to feel safe and have a space to express their anxieties, their hopes, and their fears. Our students face many obstacles, especially at this age, and can struggle to accept “differences” in themselves and in others.

At a time when the world seems to be growing increasingly intolerant and divided, students need to be able to explore their own identities and learn how to accept and value others’ differences. Perhaps now more than ever they are hearing about differences around their family table, in the news, or over social media.

The exploration of what United States culture looks like and whose voices are included or excluded, especially in today’s politically charged environment, is topmost on all our minds. Beyond Differences approaches this issue through open and honest discussion, helping children feel less confused and therefore less socially isolated during the school year.

We know that schools by nature are diverse. Heading off adverse and troubling feelings about differences requires class-wide and school-wide discussion. This guide offers step by step recommendations for a teacher/administrator/resource counselor on how to 1) bring the Know Your Classmates curriculum into your school and classroom environment; 2) mentor and support a group of motivated student leaders as they engage their whole school in positive behaviors; and 3) run Know Your Classmates Day on Friday, October 20, 2017 - one of Beyond Differences three national awareness days that take place in hundreds of schools across the United States on the same day!

Beyond Differences’ core mission is to inspire students at all middle schools, nationwide, to end social isolation and create a culture of belonging for everyone. We work directly with students – with the support of you, their teachers and administrators – because we believe students are the real activists who can ensure acceptance and inclusion of one another. We are passionately focused on supporting youth in this process of making their middle schools more socially inclusive and less socially isolating. We are thrilled that you are joining Beyond Differences in this mission.

If you are a teacher/administrator/resource counselor reading this handbook in the San Francisco North Bay, San Francisco East Bay, San Mateo, or Portland Public Schools, please contact us. Our local staff and regional program managers are available to partner with you and provide push-in teaching support for your school.

If you are a teacher/administrator/resource counselor reading this handbook from any other community in the United States, please participate in our upcoming conference calls and online learning community which will explain how to DIY (“do-it-yourself”). This program is fun and easy to use and we thank you for joining us!

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