



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

For more information, contact:

Ken Valenti, Public Information Officer

o. 914-576-4305 c. 914-563-5078

kvalenti@nredlearn.org

New Rochelle High School Sophomore Pens Memoir About Growing up on the Autism Spectrum

Shana Belfast reads from her book to Albert Leonard Middle School Class

NEW ROCHELLE, N.Y. (April 9, 2019) – New Rochelle High School sophomore Shana Belfast, who has chronicled the experience of growing up on the autism spectrum, returned to Albert Leonard Middle School today as a published author.

She read to a sixth-grade class from her 123-page memoir, [Colors Beyond Clouds: A Journey Through the Social Life of a Girl on the Autism Spectrum](#).

“I wanted to let them know that if they feel like they’re alone or if they feel like no one understands them, they are not alone,” she said after the reading. “I want to inspire acceptance.”

Belfast’s book was published this year and was chosen by Your Teen magazine, an online resource for parents of teenagers, for a list of “books for teens featuring neurodiverse perspectives.”

“This is a particularly raw and honest biography about what it’s like to live as a teenager with ASD,” author Marie Myung-Ok Leeche wrote about the book on the website. “Shana Belfast writes about her experiences with having a level of ASD that isn’t always immediately apparent.”

Belfast wrote, for instance, about joining a group of friends who turned out to have different interests and a different mindset from hers.

“Even though I was a part of a group, it was not right for me,” she read to the class.

Sara Yeterian, the class’s teacher, who also taught Belfast when she was a sixth-grader, praised her former student for having the maturity to recognize an unconstructive situation.

“It’s pretty incredible that you can say, ‘This is just not for me,’” the teacher said.

Belfast has remained in touch with Yeterian. At Belfast’s request, her former teacher read a draft of the book before it was published. Yeterian said she hoped her current students learned from it.

“I really wanted my students to experience what her struggles were, and to really understand that whatever struggles they have don’t need to get in the way of going out and doing what they want to do,” she said.

Students asked Belfast questions about her experiences, and came away with helpful advice – and fondness for the ALMS alumnus.

“She’s a cool person,” said student Arleth Perez.

Student Aneeya Bonner said one message she picked up from the presentation was, “Never let anyone judge you.”

Principal John Barnes was grateful that the students had the chance to hear from someone who was in their seat just a few years ago.

“It is a joy to welcome home Shana to share how she has overcome her obstacles,” Barnes said. “The wisdom she is able to impart is inspiring and is a gift for the sixth-graders to receive.”

In her presentation, Belfast talked about trials and triumphs. She recounted injuring her arm in gymnastics in sixth grade. But she also said her skill in the sport allowed her to add flips and splits to a performance as an Oompa Loompa in an ALMS production of Willy Wonka Jr. when she was in eighth grade. The part may have been small, but it sparked an enormous love of theater, and of performing.

At New Rochelle High School, she is in the Performing and Visual arts Education (PAVE) for singing. On April 27, she will represent NRHS singing in the annual Talent Hunt of the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Second District Conference at Delaware State University.

“It doesn’t sound like you ever give up,” Yeterian said to her during the class.

“Yeah, I don’t,” she said. “I try not to.”

About the City School District of New Rochelle

With nearly 11,000 students in 10 schools, the City School District of New Rochelle, through an active partnership amongst community, parents, staff and students, provides a high-quality and challenging education for every child, in a safe, nurturing environment that embraces rich diversity and drives success.

#