

Monday, September 20: Kenton Muscato '05

Good morning. This spring, encroaching on the end of school, I stood before you all delivering my Student Council Co-President position speech. And in my speech, I humored you all for about five minutes at my own expense. You freshmen may not fully understand what I mean when I say “at my own expense.”

I was born with Poland's Syndrome. One out of 10,000 baby boys is born with Poland's Syndrome, which causes a lack of blood to reach parts of the body, resulting in undeveloped areas typically found in the torso. In my case, my right hand and the right side of my chest. I was born with an incomplete set of ribs and chest muscle on the right side of my body. I have undergone a few operations to fill out my ribcage and help compensate for the lack of this muscle.

Last Spring, I hope I conveyed my confidence in regards to my physical differences. However, I purposely chose not to discuss the struggle, embarrassment, and ridicule I experienced acquiring that confidence. With today being the kickoff of Diversity Week, I find it only fitting to encourage you all to learn to accept differences and realize how you can affect others around you. Although you may believe that you accept differences amongst individuals, thinking and practicing that principal are completely two different things. Many of you will pass judgment on me this morning or even later today. If you have ever said “that's gay, retarded, God damn it,” or “Jesus Christ,” you unknowingly could have been offensive. I know I have said all four of those comments in the past, and currently I try to censor my language. Sometimes I am successful, and other times I'm not. And I do this not so much because it is the nice or right thing to do, but because people have offended *me* by making derogatory comments or behaving in a certain manner. Please do not think it was people that I did not know well. I have been made fun of by best friends, prominent politicians in the Buffalo area, and even students here at Nichols.

When I was young (around 6-9), my mother, sister and I would drive to Myrtle Beach with our next-door neighbors. My neighbor was my best friend, and we would hang out night and day while on vacation. We would check out the girls in their bikinis, terrorize the elderly, and constantly beg our mothers to take us to go-cart race tracks. One vacation, we had become friends with two other kids in Myrtle on vacation. For whatever reason, the two boys decided they did not like me and started to call me “Captain Hook.” Shortly after, my best friend started calling me “Captain Hook.” Today, I would just laugh it off, but when I was seven or so, I could not appreciate how naïve my friend was. I felt embarrassed, I felt ashamed and I wanted to kill myself. You think I say that jokingly, but it had crossed my mind a few times when I was younger, because of incidents such as “Captain Hook.” And although I have forgiven my friend, I cannot forget that vacation. It is something you do not forget. It always echoes in the back of my mind.

It was incidences like Myrtle Beach that made me more physically self-conscious than ever. I can recall several vacations to different beaches, where I would prop my arm up in order to cover up my chest. My mom would always yell at me and tell me to put my arm down, but I felt

protected with my arm up. Nowadays, I do not even worry about my chest. I comfortably walk on the beach shirtless with my arms down without worrying what everyone else is thinking.

Unlike my chest, most people do not notice my hand. Of course, that is until they want to shake hands. They put out their right hand, so I place my right hand in theirs. Sometimes, people pretend like nothing is wrong, and assume I just have a pitiful shake. Others look down in amazement or curiosity. And then there are those people who have no control over their reaction. They jump in shock and horror.

My father and I were walking through the city courthouse in Lockport, and a prominent politician (who is still active today) stopped my father for a moment to chat. My father kindly introduced us, and the politician put his hand out. I placed my right hand in his, and the politician jumped, made a face of horror, and dropped my hand. I was once again quite young. So, although now I would think nothing of it, at the time I was upset, ashamed and mortified. I remember I told my dad that the politician would not win the election (I was right); I was angry and frustrated. My parents then encouraged me from that point on to put out my left hand out before someone could put out their right. This did not make me feel any better. Why should I be treated any differently than any other person? Why should I hide my right hand in order to not scare others? Was my hand that scary? It did not seem fair to me. Furthermore, I felt even more alienated from “main-stream society” (“main-stream” being ten-fingered).

I have mentioned two out of many experiences in which I felt worthless, ugly, and humiliated. There were plenty of times, particularly in elementary and middle school, where classmates would tell me my hand was gross, ugly, and scary. When you are young, particularly, when you are going through puberty, it does not make you feel anymore confident. And just when I started to become more comfortable with my physical differences, I experienced what I consider a side-affect of my condition. It occurred when I first came to Nichols in 5th grade and sort-of haunted me throughout middle school.

To understand this side effect you must know that my parents (particularly my mother) and my grandfather (my physician) were always concerned about me and sports. They felt that sports could get too rough, and I could perhaps get hit in the ribs, break a rib, and puncture my lung. I was banned from football and hockey without doubt. And I was discouraged to play soccer and lacrosse after a while. I was told I could essentially walk and run by my grandfather. Woo-hoo! Understand, I am not saying I would be a stellar athlete if I had truly pursued sports. The point is my parents and grandfather discouraged me from playing sports. As a result, I found an appreciation for arts and music. In fact, I want to pursue a career in the music business.

But when I was younger, for some reason if you did not play sports, and you liked to sing, you were gay! I remember a certain student at Nichols Middle School who would constantly say I was gay (and always behind my back). He himself had his own issues to deal with, and perhaps he chose me to take his anger and frustrations out on. But even his mother would make comments about me. My mom distinctly remembers a time when I was singing a solo in a concert in middle school. She was standing in the back with my grandmother, directly behind this particular boy’s mother. When I started to sing, the mother laughed, leaned over, and whispered to her company that she knew I was “gay.” My mother wanted to kill her. Perhaps she

still does. *I* wanted to kill her. How can someone judge someone else when they do not even know the person or where she or he is coming from? Furthermore, how can a parent judge a child? And I bet someone right now is thinking that “this is so gay” or perhaps that I am “gay” for even talking about this.

If you were thinking either of those two things, I pity you. I can confidently say you have a lot to learn. There are many more people in this world who differ greatly from you. I hope you all can understand why it is important to accept people for their differences and try not to pass judgment on them before you know them. And I hope that after this morning, and especially after this week, you will try to be more aware of your language and behavior and how it may affect someone around you. Enjoy each other’s company while we are still together. Learn from each other. And for those of you who are not comfortable with your own body or personality, I hope you learn to love yourself. For every flaw you think you have, you have millions of perfections.

Thank You.