

For Immediate Release
May 26, 2023

Media Contact:

Ryan Jarvi
Director of Communication
Northwest Education Services
231.922.6242 | rjarvi@NorthwestEd.org

Visible or Invisible, Disabilities are Part of Being Human

Students at Career Tech, ACE, Life Skills Center Partner for Photovoice Project

TRAVERSE CITY, Mich. – Students at Northwest Education Services (North Ed) recently took part in a project designed to increase awareness and improve understanding of disabilities through storytelling and photography.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention states that about [1 in 4 adults](#) in the U.S. have some type of disability. Some estimate that around 80% of people living with a disability have what's called hidden, non-apparent or invisible disabilities, which can include autism, epilepsy, hearing impairments, brain injuries, mental illness and more.

Three students from North Ed's Transition Campus – including two from Life Skills Center and one from Adult Community Experience (ACE) – along with three from Career Tech collaborated on the “Visible/Invisible Disability” Photovoice project, which culminated in a gallery opening Wednesday afternoon in the lobby at Career Tech, 880 Parsons Road, Traverse City.

Photovoice is a creative tool and research method that uses photography and storytelling to capture a particular person's perspective on an issue. It is used to encourage positive change within communities, build social awareness and educate decision-makers. North Ed students used it to share their own stories and learn about others' perspectives on what “disability” means to them.

“This project has been an incredible opportunity for young people coming from different backgrounds to collaborate and learn from each other,” said John Breithaupt, supervisor of Life Skills Center. “Oftentimes, people can be confused about what it means to have a disability, and that can have unfortunate consequences. Disabilities can come in a lot of different forms, and this project has allowed our students to share their own stories and perspectives, which can be really powerful and eye-opening for people. It has helped to create visibility and awareness of people with disabilities – whether their disabilities are visible or not.”

Life Skills Center and ACE are part of North Ed's [Transition Campus](#), which serves students from throughout North Ed's five-county service area who have a variety of disabilities, ranging in age from 18-26 years old. [Career Tech](#) serves about 1,100 high school junior and senior students from the region who attend one of more than 20 career and technical education programs at Career Tech for half their day, and the other half at their local schools or homeschool.

“At its core, education is about deepening our understanding of the world and building knowledge,” said Pat Lamb, assistant superintendent of North Ed’s Career and Technical Education. “Not only has this project allowed our students and staff members to expand their understanding of disabilities, but it’s helping to build relationships and a culture that is accepting of others’ perspectives and life stories. I am very proud of and inspired by the students for putting their stories out there for all of us to see and learn from.”

The photos in the project included scenes captured at the schools’ campus, like updated accessible parking signs that display a person using a wheelchair in forward motion, rather than an older version of the sign where the person in the wheelchair is depicted as stationary.

Madee Hunter, a Kalkaska junior in the Film & New Media program at Career Tech, said she didn’t fully grasp the significance of the newer, more active version of the sign before she and the other students discussed it during the project.

Signage was also featured in another photo for the project. Maggie Sabins, an ACE student from Fife Lake, photographed a sign along Parsons Road marking the bus stop for BATA’s Bayline Bus Route. Sabins said she used the Bay Area Transportation Authority’s Bayline sign as a way to show access to transportation for people with disabilities, and that it made her feel understood and included.

Along with Hunter, fellow Film & New Media student Maya Summerfield, a homeschooled senior from Buckley, helped the other students capture and edit photos for the project.

“With visible disabilities, it can be hard to know how you should act,” Summerfield said. “Realizing that it’s normal, that they are still people like anyone else, you can communicate with them like you usually would. The project has helped normalize” those interactions, she said.

Some disabilities are less visible, said Aria Harness, a senior from Kingsley who’s studying Health Sciences at Career Tech. Harness has Turner Syndrome, which can affect some physical traits, such as a person’s height, but can also cause challenges in other less visible ways, like picking up on social cues, she said.

“I know what it’s like to feel the differences,” Harness said. “Invisible disabilities don’t get as much recognition. ... People with visible disabilities get gawked at; for invisible disabilities, people don’t always understand what you go through.”

Mischa Dresser, a Life Skills Center student from Kingsley who uses a wheelchair, was photographed next to a door at the school. He said his photo represents a misunderstanding by many people that simply because he uses a wheelchair, means he must need help with things, like opening doors. But that’s not always the case, he said.

“Help?” Dresser’s photo caption reads. “Some people assume that people in wheelchairs always need help. Sometimes I can do it by myself. So be sure to ask me.”

Tyler Peer, a Life Skills Center student from Traverse City, enjoyed the experience working with other students together as a group, and is a strong advocate for doing the project again next year.

“We should do it again next year,” he said. “I think it could be bigger every year.”

Additional photos & captions available in Google Drive:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1NcdLgYYLapdbRegZew3j3bbV7kePa_4l?usp=sharing



Northwest Education Services students from Life Skills Center, Adult Community Experience (ACE) and Career Tech partnered together for a Photovoice project called “Visible/Invisible Disability”, which culminated in a gallery opening Wednesday. From left, Career Tech social worker Laura Miller; students Mischa Dresser, Madee Hunter, Aria Harness, Maya Summerfield, Tyler Peer and Maggie Sabins; and Life Skills Center social worker Amy Moore. Miller and Moore helped coordinate the project. (Photo courtesy of Northwest Education Services)



Northwest Education Services students from Life Skills Center, Adult Community Experience (ACE) and Career Tech partnered together for a Photovoice project called “Visible/Invisible Disability”, which culminated in a gallery opening Wednesday. From left, students Madee Hunter, Mischa Dresser, Aria Harness, Maya Summerfield, Tyler Peer and Maggie Sabins. (Photo courtesy of Northwest Education Services)