



Joel Katsuda

South Lyon High School

2019 Perseverance Award Winner

Joel Katsuda has always been a quiet kid. A shy kid. A boy who kept to himself.

As a matter of fact, Joel was non-verbal for the first three years of his life. When his parents noticed he wasn't communicating, they had him evaluated and placed in speech, occupational therapy and special education classes. Adults used the words "Autism Spectrum Disorder," but he didn't realize what that meant at first, not really. He worked on becoming more social and forming relationships with other students. Though he had a few close friends in elementary school, the transition to middle school was extremely difficult for him, both socially and academically.

"My parents talked to me about it. They told me that I had autism—I didn't understand what that meant. I just felt like I was shy, like someday I'd get over it," he said. "I was in a dark place in my life."

He and his family could have chosen to homeschool, switch schools or give up, but Joel refused to do that. "This is when I began building motivation towards solving my problems ... I was willing to do whatever it took to get out of that dark place. A fire began to form in me; it would give me motivation to not only work through my own problems but inspire others to do the same."

That's exactly what he did. He faced what was difficult head on, struggling to improve his ability to talk to others and buckling down on his schoolwork. And he also met someone who helped change his life—Mrs. Dietz, a speech and special education teacher at Centennial Middle School, who he said opened his eyes to his challenges and how best he could process information and work on building basic social skills.

“She was a great influence in my life because she helped me solve the problems before they began to grow worse,” he said.

Equipped with these important tools, Joel entered South Lyon High School determined to do his best and be his best. His exceptional work ethic did not go unnoticed by his teachers and peers, and has earned him a 3.295 GPA. He played on the tennis team all four years, and rose to the rank of captain his senior year—he also volunteered to help coach others, including the girl’s tennis team and private lessons to a younger student on the spectrum interested in the sport: “I was happy to be able to encourage him to achieve his goal, too.” Joel earned the Listen, Learn, Exert Respect Award, mentored freshmen as a member of the LINKS team, and is also a valued employee at Aleko’s. Jeffrey Prueter, his drama teacher and tennis coach, wrote this about him: “Joel has had one of the largest impacts on me of any student I’ve had in my nine years of teaching. Watching him grow from an underclassman to a senior has been one of the great joys of my career thus far. The term *perseverance* is embodied by Joel, and this perseverance continues to lead him to new opportunities and successes.”

Though he has achieved so many impressive accomplishments, Joel said he is just getting started. His next goal is attend Eastern Michigan University in the fall, live in the dorms and major in business.

“I feel the way people view autism is as a disorder that takes away abilities. My goal was to make people realize that I could not only make up for it but that I could do something that not everybody is able to do,” he said. “My determination and drive hasn’t let up; I want to show that people with disabilities like mine can achieve their own goals in life.”

The South Lyon Educational Foundation is proud to recognize Joel’s incredible determination and perseverance, and is honored to present him with our 2019 Perseverance Award. Congratulations, Joel!