

What a Smile Means to Me

By Ashley Bonkowski

From my experience, a smile can change your mood an entire 180 degrees. The majority of High School was stressful and depressing for me. Granted, High School was difficult, it was especially difficult because I was hard on myself, I judged and hated myself and my smile. I was my biggest bully. It was not until this school year that I was able to confidently walk down the hallway with my head held high. I was able to do that with my brace free smile. I began believing in myself, in my abilities and talents and began to enjoy life and smile more. I transformed from a frightened fourteen year-old to a confident seventeen year old high school senior. I am lucky enough to have grown up surrounded by encouraging and supportive smiles, namely those belonging to my family and friends. As a result of my upbringing I knew smiling was important. Smiling can diffuse an awkward situation, it can hint at flirtation, mystery, intrigue and surprise. A smile in itself holds so much mystery; it holds the power of showing emotion. A smile is very much the same as viewing someone's soul through their eyes; it is a preview to their emotions, a sneak peak to their personality.

Last summer I went on a 16 day volunteer trip to Ecuador, South America to help build a school in a small rural village. The smiles on the villager's faces changed my attitude. It was incredible that these people, even though they lived in such poverty, could smile and be so genuinely happy. It reminded me that it is the little things in life that matter most and can often make the biggest difference. I went to Ecuador to make an impact; but instead came home at the one impacted. I feel that I did my part to help them out but gained so much more in return.

Starting my last year of high school, I knew I had found the secret to success, smiling! I was humming with Excitement. Suddenly, people were paying attention to me; my voice was being heard within my school and in my community. Smiling (which directly changed my confidence) led to many opportunities for me to express my opinions on social injustices. I spoke in from of my church and in front of my entire school. I also spoke to a reporter who ran two articles in the Metro dedicated to my volunteer work within our community and my efforts globally. I am very proud of my accomplishments, this past year which I prove everyday with my smile.

At school, as a way of discouraging bullying, we are reminded how everyone has their own story and how you cannot judge them until you walk a mile in their shoes. I believe people's smiles can tell their stories the smile suggests so much and is something to see when they are genuinely happy. After Ecuador, I came home and continued to fight for equality within my own community. People gave me a change and opened up to me with my newfound confidence coupled with my new smile.

I found this topic extremely powerful; mostly because there is so much that could be said with a smile. It allowed me to think back on some amazing memories. Thank you Dr. Dumore, your team not only helped to shape my smile but also helped to shape my confidence.