Student Model

The author of this essay shares a personal struggle against the backdrops of two different schools and the friends at each school. The strong conclusion neatly sums up the lessons she learned from dealing with her illness and offers a positive ending.

If Only They Knew

Anorexia nervosa is an eating disorder that I struggled with for the majority of my middle school years and a portion of my high school years. My classmates at Riverview High School were aware of my disorder, and it greatly affected the way they treated me. At the start of my junior year, I transferred to Madison High School. I decided not to tell anyone at that school about my eating disorder since I was mostly recovered by that time. Even though my friends at Riverview and Madison all showed concern for my well-being, their approaches differed greatly, especially in lunchroom behavior, conversation, and individual opinions about my personality and character.

At Riverview, lunchtime was usually a nightmare for me. I would enter the cafeteria, and in my mind, all eyes would fix themselves upon my gangly figure. I would take my place at a table full of friends and try to enjoy a “normal” lunch. The problem was that I would not always eat lunch, and that greatly concerned my friends. They would watch to make sure that I was eating properly, almost forcing food into my mouth. Sometimes I would pretend to eat and then drop pieces of food into a napkin and throw it out with the trash. When some of my friends found out, they were furious, which seemed to cause even more trouble. Lunch was obviously not my favorite time of the day, and it involved a lot of stress.

Strangely, I stopped dreading lunch when I started at Madison. No one knew that I had an eating disorder, so they did not care what I ate. This lifted an enormous amount of stress from my life. I finally had the freedom to eat what I wanted without being harassed. It was still hard for me to eat in front of other people, which is common for anorexics, but I was able to put some of my fears aside. I began to enjoy lunch instead of disposing of it.

With my Riverview friends, instead of chatting about boys and other “girl things,” we would discuss my disorder. Girls would follow me into the bathroom, and instead of styling their hair, they would check to see if I was throwing up. We never got to gossip together like normal middle-school girls because we had to focus on anorexia instead. All I really wanted to talk about was how cute Mike Reynolds looked that day.

I was totally shocked to find that all the life-and-death conversations disappeared when I went to Madison. It was so much fun to talk about the little things that occurred in everyday life. The subject of eating disorders rarely came up, and when it did, I was not the focus. I loved having the freedom to go into the bathroom without being followed. High school is meant to be filled with frivolous chatter, and at Madison I participated in more than my fair share.
I found that the students at Riverview had made many generalizations about my character, and their behavior was guided by those generalizations. Their natural instincts told them to help me. I appreciated their concern, but they never took the time to find out who I was as a person. They knew me only as an anorexic. My friends cared about my health, but they failed to care about me. Truthfully, all I wanted was for them to love me for me and not to obsess over my shortcomings.

The people at Madison took the time to know who I really was. They had no idea that I had been an anorexic, so that particular stereotype did not color their opinions of me. I was finally recognized for my talents and achievements, not my failures. I was honored as a good student. I was also honored as a cheerleader, and no one cared how I looked in my skirt. I could finally be viewed as a real person. I liked the way that people saw me at Madison, and I was no longer afraid to show my true character and personality.

My days as an anorexic taught me many lessons that I would not trade for the world. They taught me about life and how to be a better friend. I learned about the joys of routine tasks such as eating lunch. I learned to appreciate the simple things in life like the gossip shared by a group of teenage girls. I gained an understanding of what true character is. I hold no grudges against those who so desperately tried to help me. In fact, I owe them a great debt. And I appreciate the people who helped me to see that there is more to life than having an eating disorder.