



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

“Heroes and Role Models: Samantha Abeel and Dr. Oliver Sacks”

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Heroes are special people. They are born being heroes. It’s an instinct for them to run towards danger to help, while everyone else is running away. Heroes take chances. They are people you admire and respect, but not necessarily people you want to be like. If you weren’t born with that instinct then it’s very hard to gain it. Sometimes I think I might have the courage to be a hero, but I’m not sure whether I would act on it if the situation presented itself.

A role model, on the other hand, is someone who it is more possible to be like. A role model is an amazing person whom you look up to. You might or might not know your role model personally, but it’s someone whose footsteps you would consider following. For me, a role model would have the qualities of being compassionate and wise, valuing education, caring about friends and family, and having the courage and persistence to stand up for beliefs, even if they’re unpopular.

The first role model I have chosen to speak about is Samantha Abeel. She interested me because she overcame so many of her fears, and then wrote two books about them. One of these she wrote in 1993, when she was only fifteen years old. It’s a book of poems and stories called, “Reach for the Moon,” and is about her learning disability.

When Samantha was in the first grade, she did not understand anything mathematical. While all the other kids could tell time and add numbers, Samantha could not do either of these things. This learning disability is called dyscalculia.

It was Samantha’s trouble with math that first caught my eye because at the time I was having trouble with math too. It wasn’t as severe, but enough to make me feel a little down.

Samantha’s mother tried to help Samantha with her math homework, and was amazed that her daughter couldn’t even add 2 plus 5. By the time Samantha got to seventh grade, she was placed into a slower algebra class. But still, she could never get any of the answers correct.

Her mother went to the school district and asked that Samantha get special help. Once again, Samantha was given a test to see if she had a learning disability, but as always, she passed, because even though Samantha was terrible in math, she was excellent in other areas.

This time Samantha’s mom, who was frustrated by the school system, went to the board of education and fought to get Samantha into special education. The school agreed to test Samantha on each grade level of math. What they discovered was that she didn’t know basic first grade math. She was finally put into a special class, where she did great.

I think most people would have given up trying to learn if they went through what Samantha went through. Fortunately, though, she and her mother were incredibly persistent.

Soon after Samantha was diagnosed as having a learning disability, she began to write about it. At first, she would only share her writing with her parents because she knew they wouldn't criticize her.

But eventually, Samantha used her creative writing to communicate with other people who suffered like she had. After she wrote, "Reach for the Moon," Samantha spoke in front of crowds, even though she was afraid to.

At book signings, many people came up to her and told her their stories. There was one man, a doctor, who told Samantha he'd been working at the same office for 20 years, but every day he would have to take out a map to find his way to his office. He said he knew there was something wrong with him but now he knew he wasn't alone.

Samantha had compassion for these people because she knew how hard it was to have a learning disability. She wanted to educate them and share her experiences in order to spare them some of the pain.

My second role model is Oliver Sacks. He is a doctor, who studies how the human brain and mind work, which actually connects to Samantha because she has an unusual brain like the people he studied and wrote about. One reason Dr. Sacks is my role model is because he believes in his convictions and doesn't back down even when people criticize him.

In his book, *Awakenings*, Dr. Sacks describes his work with patients who were in a frozen state. What he had discovered was that these patients had reflexes. But when he told the other doctors he believed he could help these patients, the other doctors just laughed at him. But Dr. Sacks didn't back down. His persistence, courage and humanity led him to devote time and energy to patients whom everyone else had given up on.

Dr. Sacks, the son of two Jewish doctors, has an incredible curiosity, even when it comes to things about his own mind. When he was seven years old, during World War II, he lived in North London. He remembers that two bombs fell near his house. He put this in one of his books, a memoir, but later on his brother told him that he had only been there for one of the bombs. The other one exploded while he was at boarding school. Dr. Sacks realized that he came up with this memory from a dramatic letter that his other brother had written, but Dr. Sacks found it hard to believe that he hadn't been there when his mind was telling him clearly that he had. Then Dr. Sacks decided to analyze his own memories. He looked at the two experiences and noticed that in the real one he could feel himself there, but in the one where his mind had tricked him, Dr. Sacks felt as though he were watching it from far away, and he couldn't find himself in the memory.

This is how intensely Dr. Sacks studies his patients and the world around him. He's enthusiastic and very excited about so many things. Most of his attention, though, is spent on his patients. When it comes to food, he eats the same thing every day, and when it comes to clothes, he does not care how mismatched they are. Dr. Sacks is probably best known for his book *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. It is a collection of cases about individuals who have very unusual problems with their brains. For example, one man could not identify faces and would only recognize people by symbols, like knowing it was his wife because her head looked like a hat.

I think Dr. Sacks greatly values life, and believes that the mind is the key to enjoying it. I think this belief motivates him to study the mind even though it is such a difficult subject to tackle. Like Samantha's books, his also touch people deeply. Many poets, artists, and other creative people have used Dr. Sacks's stories to inspire their own work.

Samantha, Dr. Sacks, and I all love to write. But not only is writing a way to communicate, it's a way to identify your true feelings, especially through poetry. But more than writing, I value music because I feel like it's an even deeper way to express your self. Dr. Sacks also loved music, especially going to concerts. He always brought a notebook with him. He'd go to the back of the room and start to write, but would never write about the music. It was just that the music would help him get ideas.

An important quality that Samantha and Dr. Sacks have is that they both pursue their dreams. This is something I would like to do, and I know, like Samantha, I would have to keep trying and not give up. I also hope that if I have something to offer the world that I would have the same kind of courage that both Samantha and Dr. Sacks have.