

Hello my name is Jenn DiChiara and I am in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. My sister, Christine, is 16 and has autism. Since Christine is older than I am, I have not known a life without autism. I do know that life with Christine is different and much more difficult than other families.

As a seventh grader I love to hang out with my friends. I am hesitant to invite people over because my sister is different than other older sisters. While the typical older sister would be listening to her iPod or on the computer instant messaging; instead my sister chooses to spend her time sitting down in her room watching and listening to Sesame Street. She almost always makes this incredibly annoying sound that basically gives my friends a first impression that she is a "retard". I hate that word. Kids in my school use the label "retard" to describe any kid who acts completely different than them. I have come to realize they use that word because they don't understand.

As her sister, it has become part of me to help people try to understand Christine's autism. Before they come over, some of my friends know that Christine has autism but don't know what to expect when they see her. For us her behaviors are humorous and everyday occurrences but to others they are completely weird and out of the ordinary. For example, when my friends and I want a snack we have to go to the refrigerator in the garage and open the padlocked door. I have to explain that if we left the door unlocked Christine would drink all the soda and eat all the ice cream. Then I need to instruct my friends to hide their soda in their pockets while we walk past Christine or she will stalk us until she gets the can. If we have made it this far without detection we now have to go in the backyard to open the can because if Christine hears the top pop she will track down the sound and annoy us so that we will give her the can to make her go away. Our family has come to make a game of this but if I came into someone's house and did that I would be so shocked of how much trouble a simple soda could cause. Once I begin to explain that autism is made up of many behaviors including obsessions and

how Christine would do just about anything for a soda, they start to understand that even the simple task of drinking a soda is so unique for families living with autism.

This is how the learning and understanding and acceptance begin. It takes small steps and education to tear down labels. People give more love when they understand. In many ways I am so lucky to have Christine in my family. She has taught so much about tolerance and compassion. Without her I'd be just another kid in the hallway saying "retard" under my breath.