Spotlight on Redefining Success: East Student A.B. Perk Foodie Fridays Segment

Developing the Foodie Fridays video segment for the CMS East Bronco News is what is on the menu of success for 8th grade student Annabella “A.B.” Perk. Foodie Fridays is one way for Perk to combine her love of cooking with her passion for making learning disabilities more normalized, as she has dyslexia, dysgraphia and apraxia of speech.

“My ultimate goal is to become a chef, and the Foodie Friday segment is
helping me learn from experts in the field while passing along this knowledge to the students at East in our weekly Bronco News program,” Perk said. The first Foodie Friday segment aired on Oct. 15 and can be viewed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XlxrBvo5zk at the 5:13 mark.

A.B. and her mother, Michelle who teaches Math at Coppell High School, moved to CISD over the summer. According to Michelle, A.B. fell in love with cooking at the age of 4 helping her grandmother in the kitchen.

“My mother had lost the use of her arm due to breast cancer, and she was an amazing cook,” Michelle says. “A.B. would stand on a stool in my mom's kitchen and cook the recipes as my mom talked her through them. She essentially became her grandmother's hands.”

Michelle adds, growing up with dysgraphia, meant that there were fine motor skills that A.B. struggled with developing.

“When she worked in a kitchen, she was honing those skills and it didn't seem like practice to her..,” Michelle says. “Since then, her love of cooking has grown exponentially. Now she cooks to honor her grandmother, to unite people through food and to learn about different cultures from around the world.”

A.B. shares her love of food and cooking on her YouTube channel www.youtube.com/c/ChefAnnabellaPerk.

Perk's teachers are always encouraging her by referencing her future career as a chef.

“My gardening class with Mrs. [Katie] Seifert is fostering my love of garden-to-table cooking,” Perk says. “My debates with my science teacher Mr. [Lance] Hertlein on whether a beignet is a donut has led me to research the origins of food. Every week in Coach [Andrew] Smith's social studies class, he tells me he can't wait to eat at my restaurant and asks what meals I am working on next. All of this reminds me that my teachers believe in my dreams and me as much as I do.”
This support extends beyond CMS East. Students in Michelle Perk’s math classes at CHS write their favorite restaurants on a dry erase board in the class, so A.B. has a list of new places to try. CHS Principal Laura Springer and Associate Principal Melissa Arnold are encouraging A.B. to start a culinary club when she attends the high school.

“I can't wait for that to happen, because it will be so cool for students to share their heritage through food,” A.B. says.

Perk would like her student peers to understand that they probably already know someone with a learning disability. Daniel Ratcliff, the actor who played Harry Potter, has dyspraxia. Jennifer Aniston and Tim Tebow are dyslexic. Albert Einstein had dysgraphia, and people all over the world revere his genius every day.

“I personally have dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia, and apraxia of speech,” A.B. says. “I also have straight As, am in honors classes, play three sports and try to create new recipes each week.”

She adds, “Intelligence has nothing to do with someone having a learning difference. No two people learn the same way and that is normal.”

She also wants to encourage more understanding of dysgraphia through this exercise. Pick up a pen and some paper, now put the pen in your non-dominant hand. Try to write your name or a short sentence.

“The concentration it is taking you to write with your non-dominant hand and the frustration you are feeling when it doesn’t happen, this is what it's like for a dysgraphic person to write with their dominant hand every single day,” A.B. says. “It's not that we have messy handwriting because we don't care or try, it's that our brains don't always communicate well with our hands.”

Thriving with her learning differences has helped A.B. define success in several different ways.
“Your definition of success should always be changing, as success doesn't mean you have accomplished all your goals,” she says. “I think someone is successful if they are getting closer every day to who they want to be.”

She adds, “Success can be someone talking to a new person for the first time, turning in all their homework on time or making the perfect macaron. I have failed at that last one 17 times, but I still consider myself successful because I'm still trying. Not giving up is a success by itself.”