

# Common ground

Plainedge, Amityville students show how to bridge a divide.

Joye Brown

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Plainedge High School is almost all white. Amityville Memorial High School is a mix of mostly black, Hispanic and white. And [Long Island](#)'s aggressively segregated system of school districts makes it almost impossible for the sides to meet.

On the way over to the school, everyone was making jokes about how the day would go, and what "bad stuff" would take place. Coming from Plainedge, one of the least diverse schools on Long Island, I think everyone was a little nervous.

- Unsigned, Plainedge

Jason McGowan - a special education teacher for nine years at Amityville high who also coaches the girls softball team at nearby Plainedge high - wanted to change that.



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So, he filched an idea from his dad, Jim, who years ago started a "cultural exchange" program that lets students from racially mixed [Bay Shore](#) and mostly white [West Islip](#) spend a day in each others' schools.

"I talked it up to my students here," Jason McGowan said, looking around Amityville high's library. "I talked it up to my team there."

And so it was that on Feb. 4, a group of 40 Plainedge students and their teachers boarded a bus for a 10-minute ride from their school in North Massapequa to another world.

It's important and exciting being able to interact with students from different schools that have NEVER interacted with us. Not that we were aliens toward each other, it's just that our districts are very different from each other . . . creating a gap between us.

- Tamara Green, Amityville

Many of the Amityville students were nervous, too. And when the Plainedge students first settled down in their library, the groups did not mix.

That changed after McGowan took them through some icebreaking exercises.

What's your favorite TV show? The last time you cried? Complete this sentence:  
"When I dance, I look like ... "

Soon, the room filled with laughter. And then it was time for Plainedge students, now freshly paired with Amityville mentors, to attend classes together.

In public speaking, Amityville students walked one by one to a lectern to give two-minute speeches. Then the Plainedge students took a turn.

Alexa, a Plainedge senior, talked about her love for cheerleading. "All I do is athletics and hang out," she said, earning high marks for the speech from the entire class because she was both confident and interesting.

A day at this high school is so much different than at Plainedge because at Amityville it seems like everyone there is a family. There are no cliques and everyone was getting along. Even being there for the first time, I was able to feel like I have known the students there for a long time and all I had to do was be myself to fit in.

- Katie Cioriari, Plainedge

Toward the end of the day, Francis Torres, of Amityville, along with Jennifer Silhan and Deanna Devlin, of Plainedge, sat together near a row of computers.

"I was kind of nervous about what their reaction to our school would be," Torres said.

"It's very accepting here," Silhan said, repeating a phrase that would come up often when the students gathered together again, for pizza, soft drinks and goodbyes.

"Our school is all white," Devlin said, "and it's different to see everybody, all different kinds of people, getting along."

During their last period together, some students exchanged e-mail addresses. And more than one - from both schools - talked of how the visit changed their perceptions of each other.

When one of the kids said he got a text message from Plainedge asking him if he was still alive, that kind of hurt. Because we're not that kind of people you see on the news committing crimes. We're students trying to get an education like everyone else.

- Torri Branch, Amityville

Students were asked to write about their experiences, portions of which were included here. Many essays begged McGowan to keep the exchange going.

I learned that you can't judge a book by its cover. You can't judge anyone or any place until you have met them or have been there . . . I can't wait for Amityville High to come over to us.

- Nicole O'Connor, Plainedge

The essays will be gathered and placed into a book that will go to all students.

And, in the next few weeks, there will come a time when 40 students will board a bus for a 10-minute ride from their school in Amityville to another world.

I'm not ready to miss out on an event like this one. I don't remember if it was Eric's or Steven's person who shadowed them, but I LOVED HIM! He's the reason why I have to go to Plainedge. He was soooo funny!

- Brittney Ramos, Amityville

Or maybe it's a world that, for teenagers at least, is not that very different after all.