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Breaking the Silence: A Personal Journey to Address Bullying

My silence was feeding the shame eating at my soul. Every taunt and ridicule against my cousin that I witnessed but didn't protest was another bite out of my self-esteem. Ironically, because these taunters were classmates and friends, it was more difficult to show dissent. I had merely moved to a new high school and made great effort to make new friends there.

Amplifying that sense of shame was that my uncle had transferred my cousin to my school, entrusting me to look after her. Our families treated her as my younger sibling, though we were of equal age, because she suffered from ADHD. Her disruptive behaviors continued into the new school. I made excuses for her when the stories reached me but would stagger to respond when she unexpectedly shouted across the quiet classroom disclosing my private information, triggering laughter from classmates.

I can brush off these embarrassing moments and avoid disclosing any confidential information to my cousin. However, I cannot downplay the quiet dejection I see on her face after she's been mocked. No one is more disappointed in me than myself when I fail to protect her. I admire the girls in movies who unhesitatingly confront and even fight the bullies, but I feel they are as different from me as Martians. I needed a solution that befits my nature.

I recognized that my classmates are kind-hearted, but I assume that even decent people can make silly comments to break the tension created by my cousin's strangeness. They only need to be acquainted with my cousin, who is honest and caring, and to judge her beyond her erratic behavior. Once they see her as a



person, they'll realize the cruelty of their words.

To achieve that goal, I organized a lunch where all guests, including my cousin, understood its purpose. I invited friends who were open to making amends and who had influence on other students. My cousin recounted the daily challenges she faced due to her ADHD, including bullying. I didn't demand my cousin to forgive or my friends to reckon with their actions, but they naturally came to that resolution. To ease tension in the future, I suggested my friends say, "Yes, Amber", whenever my cousin comments inappropriately in class. The change in my cousin's demeanor and others towards her after the intervention were gradual. By sophomore year, she had a group of friends and a newfound sense of belonging. I've heard that her classmates would playfully scream, "Yes, Amber!" even when I'm not there.

The events that year were a learning journey for her and, more so, for me. I don't want shame to ever enter my life again. Moving forward, I'll rely on my ethical responsibility and a wish for equal and decent treatment of all individuals, especially those less fortunate than I, to propel me into action. To reach an equitable society in the future, we all must tap into our special sets of skills to empower those who are disenfranchised.