

It's ok to be different.

By Ali Kafafy, 13

One time in grade 5 I came home and told my mom that I am done being different, I am done being called "a rocket boy" and made fun of for my quirky interests and a peculiar way of speaking. I spoke like a grandpa with a PHD and my peers didn't fancy that.

My parents laughed and didn't pay much attention at this but I followed through. I put every single brain cell into fitting in. I decided to dumb myself down. Instead of reading I started playing video games, I sent my well loved telescope to the basement and registered for a Fortnite tournament. When someone was loud and silly in class, I made sure to be even more loud and silly. By the time elementary school was over I was the most known troublemaker around and took my pride in it. At least they stopped calling me a "grandpa"! The first few days of the Junior High were nerve racking. There was so much more work to do for no one to figure out that "the rocket boy" was still alive and kicking, missing the stars and the astronomy meetings.

I did well! For the most part of it. I got into fights, disrupted classes, got suspended...But there was one person there that saw straight through me, Mr. Chuck Willimas, our vice principal.

He made sure to talk to me every recess, our conversations were getting deeper. One day he called my mom and said that he knows that I am trying my best not to let myself shine and that something needs to be done.

Mr. Williams stood for me during the staff meetings educating my teachers about asynchronicities in gifted children and the need for enrichment. He freed some time for me to study what I really love. This year with masks and social distancing he knew it would be tough for me to stay put. He advocated for more breaks and some calm time during the day. When I got in trouble he treated me with respect. When I failed a subject he put a plan forward for me to do better without any judgment. Mr. Williams knew that being gifted is hard and doesn't automatically yield a school success. But he did even more...He believed in me..

He told me many times that it's ok to be different...and guess what? The telescope is back paired with an astrophotography camera and my xbox is sitting dusty in the cupboard. I still get in trouble sometimes and the school is boring, but when I am on the deck late at night trying to capture images of the far away stars, I often think of Mr. Williams. I even decided if I ever discover a new nebula I'll call it Chuck Willimas Nebula.



NGC 7000, The North American Nebula (photo by Ali Kafafy)



Messier 27, The Dumbbell Nebula (photo by Ali Kafafy)