

## Worthy Women's Scholarship Finalist Essay - First Place

By Brittney Tillman

In fourth grade, we were asked to write about what we wanted to be when we grew up. I was confident in my response, a Teacher. I knew that I could create change for so many lives through education. I saw the opportunity to help foster a love of learning in others as well as a love for one another. After graduating college and getting into my own classroom, I worked in low income schools with a high population of students with disabilities in my classroom. Creating a culture of acceptance, appreciation and inclusion for each student rather than just tolerance for one another became my goal. I worked hard to advocate for my students and make sure their needs were being met.

Then 2014 came, I became a first time mom. I can still recall getting the phone call while holding my son, "your child has Fragile X Syndrome". This conversation was followed by many more about all the things my child would never be able to do as well as a later diagnosis of ADHD, Autism and Epilepsy. It was then that I learned what it truly meant to start advocating for people with disabilities and what true inclusion looked like. I began advocating at the state and national level with the RARE Disease Foundation and the National Fragile X Foundation telling our story, my students' stories and discussing the importance of acts related to healthcare, education and inclusion. This past year, I proudly watched my son go to Capitol Hill and now represent himself as a self advocate and speak in meetings with our representatives. His story can create change for many others. People have so many unique challenges and differences in today's society. We must see past our fears and look at everyone's strengths to see what we can learn from each other. Working as an EC Preschool Itinerant Teacher in my county has opened my eyes to see the world from different perspectives and grow in love and empathy. I believe that educators, particularly at this vital age have a great responsibility to teach children to embrace diversity and model inclusion.

My goal is to make others see their worth and realize they do belong. I'm now working with preschool special education students and obtaining my B-K add on licensure. I want to create a strong foundation for these children and advocate for them. It is my mission, passion and what I was called to do.