



From l-r: Katie McClanahan '16, Mrs. Teresita Hurtado, Upper School Learning Specialist, and Caroline Malmstrom '16

Courageous Conversations

How a teacher and her students changed the way we understand learning differences

Self-Aware. Honest. Brave. Empathetic. Inspiring.

Sometimes words feel inadequate when we try to describe people we admire. The adjectives above only begin to portray the dynamic trio of Mrs. Teresita Hurtado, Caroline Malmstrom '16, and Katie McClanahan '16, who changed the way the Cannon School community understands learning differences. It has been a journey several years in the making.

As Cannon's Upper School Learning Specialist, Mrs. Hurtado has spent four years assisting students with learning differences become successful learners and self-advocates by helping them make use of a full range of school-based and community resources.

Then two years ago, Emily Malmstrom '15, Caroline's sister, took on an independent study with Mrs. Hurtado with the goal of creating awareness around the fact that some students learn differently and that not everything comes easily to everyone. Mrs. Hurtado explains, "Emily wanted that awareness, and she quickly empowered herself as a learner. She worked with a core group of teachers to bring speakers to campus to talk with parents about how to position their high school students with learning differences for college."

When it came time for Emily to wrap up

her independent study with a presentation, Caroline and Katie were in the audience. Mrs. Hurtado remembers, "Emily said she really wanted to leave a legacy and see the conversation she started carried on by other students. Katie and Caroline came to me afterwards and said, 'We want to be those people.'"

From there, Mrs. Hurtado, Caroline, and Katie worked to create the girls' senior-year schedules to make time for an independent study that would create courageous conversations around learning differences and bring about a shift of mindset among their classmates, teachers, and families.

Mrs. Hurtado remembers when the girls established the goals for their independent study. "They are risk-takers in the best sense of the word—from being students with significant learning differences at a school where the rigor is so demanding, to being successful at it, to sharing their diagnoses to help others. That's really brave."

Not only were Katie and Caroline brave, but they were imaginative, authentic, and invested whenever they shared their own struggles with ADHD to help others. As Vice President of Student Council, Caroline understood how they could weave their message into the larger theme Student Council had chosen for the 2015-2016

school year—Be Unique. Be United. She produced a video that shared her personal experience and included other students, and even teachers, who rise above their own learning differences. Caroline shares, "Just the fact that we could put out a call to students and teachers with learning differences and that they would respond and participate was amazing to me."

The next step the girls took was to bring a panel of students and teachers with learning differences to the Upper School community meeting in November. Katie shares, "We wanted to be honest without looking for sympathy. We wanted to explain how diversity should include diversity of learning, and how it fit with the theme of Be Unique. Be United. Being on stage at that meeting made me realize how far we had come and that we were making an impact."

Katie and Caroline admit to feeling anxious leading up to the community meeting. They were curious about the feedback they would receive. As it turned out, they were amazed by the positive response from their friends, classmates, and faculty. And on the heels of the community meeting, they took a panel of students to speak at an Upper School faculty meeting where they shared how it feels when you cannot keep up the pace and tips on how teachers can help.

Through experiences like these, Caroline and Katie were being approached more and more by other students with diagnosed learning differences and students who simply struggled with certain skills like study habits or organization. Realizing there was a need beyond the classroom, the girls began a peer mentoring program in which they regularly met with over a dozen students. Mrs. Hurtado explains, "The empathy they showed was amazing. They gave up their drop periods in order to meet with students. And that had a significant impact. The kids realized, 'Ok, you really mean it.'"

Caroline smiles when she talks about one of her favorite mentees. "He really just needed me to listen and be his cheerleader. Mentorship was my favorite part of the whole experience."

Katie remembers a time she helped a student prioritize her agenda. "It was such a small thing, but her anxiety dropped immediately. I understood. That used to be me."

Now that's inspiring.