

Kuper's Speech

Connections. We all need to feel connected. On the surface, I'm an introvert. Often times I'm the guy walking around Walmart for an hour looking for peas, too shy to ask for help. But for as long as I can remember, the Boys & Girls Club has been a place where I've felt connected, a place where I belong. A place where I could ask for help.

My Club is a place where STEM is encouraged and kids like me are welcomed. Connections, curiosity, knowledge, creativity, the things I believe in, are all supported by the staff. One of the hardest things to do is to have people believe in you. I'm one of the lucky ones because my parents have always believed in me, and my teachers and coaches, too.

And at the Club, I have role models who will always be there for me.

I believe wholeheartedly in the old saying that knowledge is power. As a kid - and now - scientific thinking has always fascinated me. I want the next generation to have a better chance of solving our world's most pressing problems. We can find a cure for cancer; we can reduce carbon emissions. But we must work together, collaborate and listen to each other, care about each other.

Although I'm young, I have not made it through life so far without facing serious personal struggles. Sometimes it feels like good health is the Achilles heel for me and my family. I'll never forget the time in 2017 when my sister and I came home from school to find my parents gone and my grandpa greeting us with a concerned smile. We learned then that my dad had a brain tumor and needed surgery. **He would be gone for weeks.** My emotions were boiling to the surface. I pushed my friends and family away rather than trying to connect with them.

I was lucky, though, because Mr. Greg asked me to join the Robotics Team at the Club. After school, the Club was a place I could forget my worries, **and just be a kid again.** I was always thinking about my dad, but for a few hours a day I could be distracted by the Club. **It was a connection I**

desperately needed. I became the captain of my Club's robotics team and we ended up winning a first place Navigation Award at the Colorado Robotics Challenge. We were the youngest team in the competition, going against all college kids.

And even better, my dad's surgery worked. His recovery was slow and painful and long. But the sheer joy and relief of his recovery hits me at the oddest times and places.

Unfortunately, last year I learned that I had Type 1 diabetes. My cross-country coaches were the first to suspect there was something wrong. I was in the best shape of my life and suddenly it was all slipping away. My quest for knowledge now led me to learning about finger sticks, insulin shots and blood sugar readings. Not what I expected, but I had no choice.

I had to learn that that there was no cure for type 1 diabetes. It went against everything I believed in... But I'm learning to manage thanks to my family, my doctors, my coaches, my teachers and my Club staff. I know from watching my dad overcome his brain tumor that diabetes, while overwhelming, **cannot alter the trajectory of my life.** I'm now confident that I can overcome this challenge and I know one of the best ways to do that now. And guess where I feel connected now more than ever?

This summer will be my third summer teaching STEM at the Club. It will also be my second summer helping Club kids with math through the Club's Summer Learning Project. I make connections with hundreds of kids at my Club through my classes. **I think I inspire them. They need me. I help myself by helping others. It works for both of us, believe me.**

Thank you for listening to my stories and thank you for supporting our Clubs and kids like me.