

Unwitting Role Models

- Becky Twaalfhoven

Junior year is notoriously “the big year.” This is the year when who you are and what you do starts to be important for your future after high school, and the stakes are high to start gaining experience for the world and not be left behind. The ensuing competition can be exhausting and life-consuming. In the push to secure a future, everything that happens, and every decision you make, is significant in determining the outcome. But the choices you make and the attitude you have don’t just determine your future; they have the potential to change the path of people around you, whether you know it or not. Whatever you choose, somebody is always looking to you as an example, sometimes in surprising ways. In the high school, younger students watch everything and often mirror it themselves. Classmates, too, see your approach to schoolwork and subsequent results and compare them to their own. In school and out, people pay attention to how you treat other people, deal with adversity, and challenge yourself, as well as other aspects of your character. Ultimately, nobody goes through life without being noticed, and attention breeds imitation.

Role models come in all forms. Throughout our childhood, role models change from family members to famous figures to popular celebrities, with varying degrees of emulation. But nobody ever mentions the people in everyday life who act as subconscious role models to us: the people whose names we hear for their accomplishments, or whose reputations are known in school or the community. It is these people who can truly have an impact on our futures. The word role model has positive connotations, but in reality addresses both positive and negative influences. For example, a senior who was accepted into a prestigious school may be a role model who impacts the work ethic of a freshman student hoping to do the same. At the same time, a senior who skips class and enjoys having free time and partying rather than focusing on school may be a role model for a freshman looking to make friends and decrease academic pressure. Neither older student makes their choices with the intent of inspiring younger students; nonetheless, these choices can determine the choices of people who notice them.

This point should serve as a reminder that the decisions you make for yourself have impacts far beyond you. One individual has the power to be a positive or negative influence in somebody else’s life without consciously doing so. In the same way, everyone has examples who they look at for different characteristics and reactions to compare or apply to themselves. It would be impossible to take into account every possible way that a decision affects other people, and attempting to do so would add unnecessary pressure and complications. However, it is important to consider that what you do and how you approach situations has the potential to change not just your life’s path, but many others. As a junior, there are hundreds of tiny decisions to make, but it is the responsibility of being a role model that makes this year “big.”