



## COME AS YOU ARE

Every day, at Howe Middle School in Abbotsford, the lunch bell rings, announcing freedom from class as students pour into the hallways. The noon supervisors begin to arrive—including Youth Unlimited youth workers, like Maria Dyck. These field workers keep an eye open for youth falling through the cracks and seek to create safe spaces of connection and belonging. More often than not, these “spaces” are not actual physical locations; they exist in the bonds created.

One day, at the start of her noon hour supervision, Maria’s warm eyes caught the eye of a downcast-looking young boy named Zach\* who was sitting alone and she went over to talk to him. Picked out amidst the chaos of the busy pre-teen hallway, Zach felt safe and seen. As days went on, the two built a connection. Zach’s eyes would fill with joy at Maria’s arrival, eager to update her on his projects and activities.

Some days Maria can be found outside, providing schoolyard supervision with other adults. On one particular day, Maria’s authenticity struck just the right chord with a supervisor named Katherine\* who needed a safe space. When Maria asked how she was *really* doing, tears welled up in Katherine’s eyes. As



she let them fall, the walls began to fall with them. The two met later for coffee and their connection blossomed into friendship.

As trust built, Katherine introduced Maria to her son, who is on the autism spectrum. Much to the surprise of both women, it turned out Maria was already well-acquainted with the boy. It was Zach, the same shy pre-teen who used to be alone in the hallways!

Zach, along with his sister, began attending YU events and the friendships deepened. Katherine shared with Maria how deeply it touched her that YU authentically welcomed her family with genuine acceptance and love. She explained that in the past, the phrase “come as you are” meant a presenting an idealized version of one’s self. Through Maria, Christ’s unconditional love and authenticity was experienced by the entire family, and the words ‘come as you are’ began to mean so much more.

\*Zach and \*Katherine = Not their real names