

# Dakota teen with Down Syndrome inspires school sing-alongs

Junior has been featured on NBC Nightly News



Dakota High School junior J.P. Spagnuolo, who has Down Syndrome, has been featured on NBC Nightly News for inspiring spontaneous school sing-alongs at the Macomb Township school. Pictured is Spagnuolo at Dakota surrounded by his friends and classmates during a recent sing-along. (PHOTO COURTESY OF JAMES SPAGNUOLO)

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PUBLISHED: March 8, 2022 at 11:01 a.m. | UPDATED: March 8, 2022 at 11:55 a.m.

The latest singing sensation was not discovered on “The Voice” or “American Idol,” but in the hallways of Dakota High School. Junior J.P. Spagnuolo can’t even stop at the local McDonald’s drive-thru without being recognized.

“He loves music, he always has from the time he was a very little kid. He has had dozens of harmonicas and a drum set. He loves music and loves to sing,” J.P. Spagnuolo’s father, James Spagnuolo, said. “He will truly surprise you. We will have something on the radio and he will know the words. And my wife and I wonder ‘Where did you learn this from?’”

Spagnuolo, age 19, has Down Syndrome and is in the Creative Learning Program (CLP) at Dakota. Although he knows a song catalogue that includes everything from ABBA to Pink Floyd to The Beatles, his favorite song to sing is “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

“We used to go to Jimmy John’s Field a lot when it first opened,” James Spagnuolo a Marine Corps veteran, said. “We would always stand and sing the national anthem, and the routine stuck with him.”

James Spagnuolo said through the CLP Program J.P. participates in life skills and has a job through school that includes assisting with hall passes.

“He got to know the students, and they got to know him,” James Spagnuolo said.

Dakota Principal Kevin Koskos said that through the CLP program, J.P. and some of his CLP classmates take lunch orders in school offices.

Kelly Spagnuolo, J.P.’s mother, said one student began singing holiday songs with him around Christmas.

“He is not bashful. One of J.P.’s favorite things to do is to go to Target on the weekend. It’s an outing for us. He doesn’t care who you are, race, religion, color or creed. He says hi and wants to be everybody’s friend,” James said, adding he believes his son was first inspired to spontaneously sing the national anthem due to the large flag displayed in the atrium area at the center of Dakota High School. A trend began in the school with a small group of students stopping to sing the national anthem with J.P. Spagnuolo, and other friends began to join in.

“The head custodian, one day, happened to say, ‘Do you know about this thing going on with the anthem every day at the end of C lunch? Come on out and see it.’ Gathered were a couple dozen kids. It started with this group of half a dozen and grew and grew,” Koskos said.

J.P. has a paraprofessional who works with him, Tracy Tomaszewski. She began recording videos of the sing-alongs at Dakota to send to J.P.’s mom.

“She sent the first one over, seven boys and J.P. And then the next day she sent it, and there were 15 or 20 kids. Then that is when I sent a video to Ron Roberts, the superintendent. He asked if he could put it on Twitter and it snowballed,” James Spagnuolo said.

Shortly before J.P. Spagnuolo’s Feb. 12 birthday, students school-wide were planning a “Happy Birthday” sing-along for him as well as the national anthem sing-along.

“It was incredibly heartwarming and moving, to see our entire atrium, basically full of kids, down to the cafeteria and surrounding the second floor catwalk around the atrium, all singing along to ‘Happy Birthday’ for his birthday. It was amazing,” Koskos said.

WDIV-TV (Channel 4) news caught wind of the sing-alongs and did a segment on J.P. in mid February, which led to NBC Nightly News following up with a story a week later. The NBC Nightly News link can be found via links at Chippewa Valley Schools’ Facebook page, [facebook.com/people/Chippewa-Valley-Schools/100063702422436](https://www.facebook.com/people/Chippewa-Valley-Schools/100063702422436).

The Spagnuolos reside in Clinton Township, and several of J.P.’s friends from Dakota came to visit him and bring gifts on his birthday.



Dakota High School junior J.P. Spagnuolo was recently featured on NBC Nightly News for inspiring spontaneous school sing-alongs at Dakota. He had a memorable birthday on Feb. 12 and around that date, which included a family party, visits from friends bearing gifts and a special sing-along at school. (PHOTO COURTESY OF JAMES SPAGNUOLO)

“It is interesting because you always wonder if your child is going to fit in, cognitive delay or not, and we were surprised to know he fit in quite well,” Kelly said.

Shortly after his birthday, J.P. was invited to watch as some of the boys played basketball at the Greg Grant Sportsplex. On another date in February he was asked to sit on the bench with the Dakota’s boys varsity basketball team.

“It is weird. It is like, I took him out to Taco Bell and Target over break. We were at the drive-thru and they said, ‘J.P. how are you doing?’ I had no clue who it was,” James said. “My wife before break, they were at McDonalds and someone at the drive-thru recognized him. At the varsity basketball game he attended, it was really weird. People wanted pictures with him. The opposing team was from Hamtramck and they wanted photos with him.”

J.P.’s sing-alongs usually occur around lunchtime at Dakota. Gavin Tencza, a 17-year-old senior at Dakota, was one of the students who started taking part in the sing alongs. Tencza said students have continued after break.

“A group of 15 of us did it today, we were back from break,” Tencza said on Feb. 28.

His student signing partners get as much out of the sing alongs as J.P. does.

“We do it because it is fun. It is really fun to see J.P. happy, and it makes us smile, too,” Tencza said.