



## The Transformation of TRANSFORMERS

In the spring of 2009, Patty Franz, an administrative aide in the School of Communication at Illinois State University, decided to act regarding the bullying that her granddaughter experienced as a student at Parkside Junior High School, a Unit 5 junior high in Normal, Ill. She expressed her concern to graduate students at Illinois State. A group of four graduate students (Alauna Akins, Jennifer Bowman, Kathren Sammis and Tim McKenna), along with Franz, decided to form a team that would use their communication skills to start an anti-bullying and conflict-resolution initiative. Not only did this group possess the necessary communication skills as well as the knowledge of communication theory and educational pedagogy, but they held a strong sense of civic duty and compassion for others.

In May of 2009, the founding members met with Sue Lakin, the head of Parkside Junior High School's guidance department. Initially, Lakin's interest was low due to the timing of the meeting near the end of the school year. However, the group continued to meet during the summer to develop program plans.

The team created the name TRANSFORMERS. The acronym stands for:

- T**eaching conflict resolution
- R**einforcing positive morals and values
- A**ddressing community issues
- N**ourishing dreams and aspirations
- S**haring compassion with others
- F**orming plans for progress
- O**vercoming personal obstacles and interpersonal challenges
- R**esponding to the needs of other peers

**M**odeling active citizenship  
**E**ngaging students in real life situations  
**R**especting individual differences  
**S**trengthening bonds between parents, student and teachers

The partnership between TRANSFORMERS and Parkside Junior High was formed in October of 2009. Franz, who was named staff advisor for TRANSFORMERS, received an e-mail from Lakin expressing her interest in the group facilitating an anti-bullying and conflict resolution program and she asked them to start within two weeks at the school.

During the fall semester of 2009, the TRANSFORMERS team grew from five to 20 [volunteers](#) (five founding members, plus Michael Storr, Benjamin Slack, Brian Seay, Chris McAllister, Curtis Nash, Daniel Almanza, Kylie Roman, Melissa Kampa, Amy Secretan, Sarah Franzen and Rachael Marco).



Most of the 20 members were Communication 110 teachers, a general education course at Illinois State University. The group met to answer [questions](#) such as: “What do we want to do once we actually get into the classroom? Where do we find materials to be most effective? How do we accomplish all of this with no money? How do we best serve the needs and wants of Parkside? How do we integrate the culture and climate here with the culture and climate of a junior high?” (Team Excellence Award Application, 2009)

After two weeks of planning, the TRANSFORMERS’ [Mission Statement](#) was developed. Additionally, two PowerPoint presentations were created to teach [conflict resolution](#) and [I-Messages](#). The TRANSFORMERS started to teach seventh and eighth graders at Parkside Junior High in October 2009 using these tools.

In December of 2009, the TRANSFORMERS applied for the Illinois State University Team Excellence Award. The team was recognized for their efforts at the Founder's Day Celebration, where they were awarded the 2010 Team Excellence Award. Dr. Simonds taught a [graduate seminar](#) during the spring of 2010 that aimed to diversify TRANSFORMERS' teaching approaches while further grounding them in communication theory and sound pedagogy. Franz also partnered with Dr. John McHale and his students in the making of a documentary, *Through Their Eyes*, which focused on anti-bullying and conflict resolution and featured a segment devoted to the TRANSFORMERS' efforts.

The 2010-11 school year was highlighted by the implementation of *Second Step* curriculum into the TRANSFORMERS program, new management members and the expansion of the TRANSFORMERS' *Second Step* teaching efforts into three new elementary schools. Beginning in the fall of 2010, Dr. William Cupach, Professor and Director of Graduate Studies and Dr. Simonds, joined the TRANSFORMERS team. Dr. Cupach primarily oversaw the planning and execution of TRANSFORMERS projects, while Dr. Simonds educated the program's graduate students on how to properly teach *Second Step* programs to students. *Second Step* is a set of curriculums for students ranging from early childhood to middle school aged, which guides teachers and student through lessons about social and emotional learning skills, including non-violent methods for resolving conflict. Individual *Second Step* kits are sold for each grade level. Dr. Simonds also assisted the graduate students in creating a PowerPoint presentation to guide the teaching of lessons.

As the management team expanded, the TRANSFORMERS' reach increased as well. TRANSFORMERS remained dedicated to fostering a strong relationship with administrators, and students of Parkside Junior High. TRANSFORMERS also began teaching social and emotional learning skills to fellow Unit 5 students at Coleen Hoose Elementary, Oakdale

Elementary and Parkside Elementary. Approximately 40 School of Communication [graduate students volunteered](#) to serve as TRANSFORMERS during the 2010-11 school year, with three members required during each school visit. Through a peer mentor system designed to assist first-year TRANSFORMERS, mentors were available to offer guidance and support during teaching sessions. As TRANSFORMERS grew, the program also continued to receive recognition for its community outreach efforts.

Michael Blight, intern for TRANSFORMERS, created a [summary of lesson plans](#) for *Second Step* kits in the summer of 2010, and continued to work on them through the Fall semester. The plans highlighted the arts and crafts and physical activities tied to each lesson.

After being awarded a grant in 2010 from the [American Democracy Project](#) (ADP) to offset the costs of *Second Step* kits for kindergarten through fifth grade after school programs, the TRANSFORMERS also earned the [Student Civic Engagement Award](#) in 2011. The Student Civic Engagement Award was presented to the TRANSFORMERS for the organization's commitment to the students of the community.

A new management structure, the fostering of new mutually beneficial relationships and a new potential direction for TRANSFORMERS emerged in 2011-12. During the fall of 2011, Dr. Cupach and Dr. Simonds became directors of the TRANSFORMERS. An administrative board was also created, which included founder and administrative aide, Patty Franz. Additionally, a student intern was hired to help Franz with administrative tasks related to TRANSFORMERS, such as uploading scheduling information and pertinent documents to a newly created, password enabled information sharing website, called SharePoint. As the TRANSFORMERS continued to gain members, a [team handbook](#) was established, which detailed contact information, a code of conduct and the locations of participating schools. Along with the implementation of the handbook, members were also encouraged to journal

observations from their TRANSFORMERS teaching experiences to document areas for improvement.

One of the challenges the administrative staff faced was getting the [parent release forms](#) signed by after school participant's parents. Each student was required to have a form on file before they could participate. Some of the parents thought the language was too strong in the release form. Building strong relationships with the students, schools and parents, and having continuity in the volunteers that teach at the programs, are essential in elevating this difficulty for the TRANSFORMERS staff.

During the spring of 2012, Dr. Simonds taught another graduate seminar that focused on further developing TRANSFORMERS to meet the needs of community elementary and junior



high school students. Grounded in communication education theories and concepts, social and emotional learning theories and concepts and *Second Step* research, every member of the course became a part of a task force that sought to determine how

TRANSFORMERS could effectively evolve from its current state. Ultimately, the task force proposed a mission: To teach students communication skills that improve their social emotional competence, thus reducing the amount of bullying and aggression that occurs among school-aged children. To achieve the mission, the task force developed a strategic plan that will take TIME, which is an acronym for: (T)rain teachers, (D)implement assessment, (M)odel behavior and (E)ngage the community.

Throughout the 16-week course, several opportunities to engage the community were fostered through the creation of mutually beneficial relationships. The task force met Barbara Findley Stuart, co-chair of the Peaceful Schools Committee and a McLean County Community Compact consultant. Findley Stuart offered insight into existing Emotional and Social Learning practices within the Bloomington-Normal area, and she was particularly helpful in identifying that Unit 5 already has a *Second Step* kit in every school. This was a crucial discovery because the task force had already determined, based on research, that *Second Step* is most effective when the classroom teacher delivers the course material. Therefore, the task force began to reevaluate how it could accomplish its initial goal, which was to reduce the amount of bullying and aggression that occurs among school-aged children. It was proposed that instead of sending TRANSFORMERS into classrooms to teach *Second Step* lessons, it would be more effective for TRANSFORMERS to go to programs that already incorporate *Second Step* as a part of their curriculum. Therefore, the TRANSFORMERS would be reinforcing social and emotional learning skills, already taught in the classroom, through after-school arts and crafts and physical activities.

In total, the task force found it would be most beneficial for the TRANSFORMERS to focus on (1) training classroom teachers how to implement *Second Step* into their curriculum, (2) assessing the TRANSFORMERS' to ensure that their efforts are meeting the desired outcomes, (3) modeling and reinforcing behavior taught in *Second Step* through after school programs and mentorship opportunities and (4) engaging the community through mutually beneficial relationships with the Peaceful Schools Committee, Metcalf Elementary School, Unit 5 after-school programs and Kingsley Junior High School. The spring of 2012 culminated with a presentation of TIME by the task force to the TRANSFORMERS leadership team and graduate

student members. A graduate student was also given the task of developing *Second Step* teacher training plans during the summer of 2012.

While the goal of combating bullying by TRANSFORMERS has not changed since the organization's inception in 2009, the method that the TRANSFORMERS use to accomplish that goal has evolved over time. The spring of 2012 brought several potential changes to TRANSFORMERS; however, as of the end of the semester, most of the proposed changes were still being discussed.

In the fall of 2012, Graduate Students in the School of Communication continued to provide anti-bullying and digital aggression (cyber-bullying) PowerPoint presentations at Parkside Junior High School. TRANSFORMERS began delivering lesson plans for our bully prevention program for Thomas Metcalf School during recess and After-School Programs.

TRANSFORMERS was honored to win the Civic Engagement Award for the first time in February of 2013. The award was sponsored by Senior Professionals and the American Democracy Project at Illinois State University.

TRANSFORMERS, students in Dr. Cheri Simonds's COM 481 course created modules focused around Social Emotional Learning that are based off the Second Step Program. The modules would be used in a comprehensive teacher training program. Social Emotional Learning has been shown to reduce bullying and social aggression in schools and includes specific communication skills such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, interpersonal communication, and decision-making.

By educating the children and teachers in the Bloomington-Normal community, individuals that participate in this program are simultaneously growing as individuals, scholars and mentors. TRANSFORMERS support the School of Communication's commitment to

Illinois State University's mission of civic engagement by transforming the hearts, minds, and actions of the students and the community.

In 2013, we began working with students in Kingsley Jr. High with their in-school suspension program mentoring and tutoring.

In 2014 Unit 5 dissolved their in-school suspension program and we still work with their students mentoring and tutoring.

In 2015 we worked in Kingsley working in the classroom mentoring and tutoring their students. Patty Franz worked with the TRANSFORMERS in the schools and Dr. Cheri Simonds at one time held workshops to give educators the tools they need to implement these social-emotional learning skills and reduce social aggression in their classrooms.

In 2016-Present we are still in Kingsley working in the classroom mentoring and tutoring their students. We also now tutor and mentor one on one in the counseling office at Kingsley. In the spring of 2016 another group of TRANSFORMERS started working with students at Parkside Jr. High. Their services focus on education topics including study skills, test anxiety, work ethic, anti-bullying, and stress management. TRANSFORMERS pairs teach these topics to three weekly groups (two sixth grade, one seventh grade) during their tutorial period, using a set curriculum. We also changed our name from Rebound-TRANSFORMERS to just TRANSFORMERS.

Additionally, we have remained dynamic—constantly evolving to best meet the needs of the community. We continually ask, “What can we do better? How can we make this better for future TRANSFORMERS?” In doing so, TRANSFORMERS possess both the university's core value of civic engagement but also the scholarly inquiry one would hope to foster in higher education.