



# HEALTHY TRAILBLAZER JOURNAL

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## Making connections with basketball

Playing basketball has connected RJ Smith with other people and made him a better person. It's also propelled him to a spot on the La Salle University team. RJ, whose full name is Ryan Smith, Jr., spoke about his personal journey through basketball in a recent interview with *Healthy Trailblazer Journal* reporters.

RJ is a student and point guard at Philadelphia's Roman Catholic High School who has committed to play for La Salle beginning in Fall 2026. He said he first picked up a ball when he was 4 years old, because his dad and many of his uncles played basketball. He started to take it seriously when he was 7 or 8 years old. Since then, he said he has traveled for basketball and made relationships he keeps today. "That orange ball has taken me everywhere," RJ said.

Social connections are important for strong mental health, according to an article by the Harvard School of Public Health. One way to make those connections is by participating in group activities. "I made a lot of friends fast by talking to people and being on the basketball team," said RJ.



Illustration by *Healthy Trailblazer Journal* reporter

RJ also discussed several other topics related to school and basketball. His answers have been

*(Please see A conversation on Page 2)*

## Tapping into other people's feelings

Listening to understand, not just to respond, is one way to show empathy, says a DePaul staff member who works with school families.

Ms. Westfield, family connection liaison and high school coordinator, explains that empathy means putting yourself in someone else's situation.

Being able to read and understand other people can help you make better decisions, help you connect with others, and help other people feel seen, according to the Psychology Today website and the American Psychological Association.

Usually when there's a conflict between two friends, that's when they might show empathy, said Ms. Westfield. One hopes that a person feels heard

and understood. A lot of people hold in a lot of the stuff they go through. They don't share things. They go through things at school they don't share at home, or things at home they don't share at school. It helps them feel connected to someone at school.

For people who are still developing empathy, it's important for them to practice active listening, said Ms. Westfield. "I think it's important to ask people, 'how does that make you feel?' Get more information and show support when needed," she said. "The older I get, the more important I think it is to think about others' perspectives. It's not just conflicts with your

*(Please see Think on Page 2)*

# A conversation with DePaul's RJ Smith

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shortened and lightly edited.

**Q:** What has basketball taught you?

**RJ:** Life skills—taking heed to different criticisms. Not talking all the time but sitting back and watching people's movements.

**Q:** What makes you keep going?

**RJ:** My family keeps me going. I know what I'm playing for and fighting for everyday. They motivate me. I take a lot of what my dad says and use it in my every day. There's always a good message behind it. Sometimes I don't want to hear it, but I always go back to him and later I understand.

**Q:** How do you keep up with school and basketball at the same time?

**RJ:** Don't be scared to ask for help. If I know my schedule is busy, I go to my mom, girlfriend, or my dad to ask for help with time management.

**Q:** What advice do you have for students who love basketball?

**RJ:** Stay in the gym, eat healthy food, build good habits. Make sure your schoolwork is always done and take time out for yourself. Find yourself outside of basketball. It can end up being your identity and people don't know you outside of that.



Illustration by Arielle Burgess

**Q:** Have you ever wanted to quit?

**RJ:** Yes, my ninth-grade year. Just going every day and having a lot more bad days than good. Going home at 9 p.m. I wasn't used to that. Eventually I was a starter on the team and found success.

**Q:** Who has inspired you?

**RJ:** My mom has inspired me to do my best. Even though she doesn't know a lot about basketball, she still inspires me.

**Q:** Describe a memorable time when you felt connected to people at school.

**RJ:** When I was in ninth grade, I was the sixth man coming off the bench. I felt great energy that my peers were praising me for that.

**Q:** What advice do you have for students about high school?

**RJ:** Take your time because it's going to go fast. Find your niche or whatever makes you happy and nurse it. Whatever your passion, do it 100 percent so you don't have any what-ifs.

**Q:** Why did you choose to commit to La Salle?

**RJ:** I chose La Salle because I found a place where I know I'm going to play, where they *need* me and not just want me. There's a family environment. I could feel the great energy over there.

## Think about what others are going through

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peers, but sometimes you experience conflicts with your parents or siblings. It's helpful to think about how they might be feeling."

Ms. Westfield wants people to know that everyone is going through something. Before you open your mouth, think about what they might be experiencing. "Lead with love and kindness. It's not always easy to do, but that's a start. I try to remember that, even with strangers."

—By Lilly Jones, Madison Walker, Peyton Young, Jaylaa Ellis, Chase Gresham and Ayane Douglas

**Putting yourself in someone else's shoes**

One of Sean Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens* is Habit Five: Seek first to understand.

Here is an example: Say Emily has a friend, Tasha. Tasha came to school one day. She was very upset and couldn't stop crying. Everyone around her didn't seek to understand what she was going through, but Emily did. Emily sat next to her and asked her, "What's wrong Tasha, you seem down today?" Tasha looked at Emily and explained that her dog passed away. Emily put herself in Tasha's shoes and said, "I understand what you're going through. I know that losing something important to you is hard. But you'll get through it." —By Madison Walker

# Whom 8th graders are grateful for

After researching the health benefits of making connections throughout the school year, eighth-grade reporters reflected on the connections they're grateful for in their lives.

Someone that I'm connected to is my best friend. I gained a relationship with her at The DePaul Catholic School. This relationship is important to me because we have known each other for a very long time and she's very helpful and she understands me. This relationship makes me feel great and understood. —*Jaylaa Ellis*

Someone I'm connected to is my mom. I connected with my mom by the love and care she gave to me and I started to care for her too. This

relationship is important to me because I grew up with it, she is my right hand, and I don't know what I would be with her or who I would be. She makes me a better person and makes me want the best out of myself. —*Peyton Young*

I am connected with my mom because she is always there for me when I need help, and I just really appreciate her so much for everything that she does for me. —*Ayane Douglas*

I am connected to Ms. Dickson. We connected back in fifth grade when she took all the new students into a small group. Ms. Dickson is very supportive and caring toward me. This relationship makes me feel seen, like I can talk to her about anything. —*Madison Walker*

## Cub Corner

# Book helps kids understand feelings

*The Boy with Big, Big Feelings*  
Written by Britney Winn Lee  
Illustrated by Jacob Souva

In this book, the main character is a boy who has strong emotions to all the things around him. He thinks he needs to hide his feelings because he's afraid of being teased. He meets a girl at the park. She also has big feelings.

When the boy and girl meet at the park, they become less lonely and have the confidence to show their big feelings to other people.

Second-grade Cub reporters in Ms. Rivera's class recently read and reviewed *The Boy with Big, Big Feelings* and thought that this book would be a good addition to DePaul's Peace Room, a space where students can go to relax. The

illustrations help the reader understand the feelings by using colors.

All 18 of Ms. Rivera's reporters enjoyed the story and thought it would be appropriate for kids of all ages.

Teachers could use this book to help talk to their students about big feelings, friendship, and kindness toward other people.

*DePaul Healthy Trailblazer Journal*

A publication of The DePaul Catholic School, an Independence Mission School in Philadelphia. Eighth-grade reporters include Sebastian Agum, Jerrell Burgess, Arielle Burgess, James Conley, Dwaine Cooksey, Ayane Douglas, Jaylaa Ellis, Chase Gresham, Bozir Harper, Lilly Jones, Dallas Marshall, Madison Walker, Xavier Whittington, and Peyton Young.

The newspaper's faculty advisor is Mr. Leonard. DePaul's school principal is Ms. McKenzie.

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# Cub Corner

## Students use art to reduce stress

Art can relax you and reduce stress, say researchers at Drexel University.

Ms. Melly's second-grade reporters tried an art activity to see whether it helped them relax. They created Zentangles.

The reporters said they felt more peaceful, and their breathing was slower when they were drawing.

Here are directions to make a Zentangle. There are no right or wrong ways to do this!

Here's how to make a Zentangle:

- \* Draw a square on paper.



Illustration by a first-grade Cub reporter in Ms. Melly's class

- \* Inside the square, draw lines from one side to another. The lines can be straight or curved. You'll have empty spaces where the lines cross.

- \* Inside each empty space, create a pattern with colors and/or shapes.

## Friendship is a skill you can practice

*Can I Join Your Club?*

Written by John Kelly

Illustrated by Steph Laberis

Duck is trying to make friends and decides to try joining a club. He tries to join several clubs including Elephant Club



and Lion Club. Those clubs won't let him in because he can't roar like a lion or trumpet like an elephant. He

decides to start his own club. Anyone can join his club.

Ms. Melly's second-grade Cub reporters recently reviewed this book. The book teaches about empathy. Empathy

is when a person can relate to someone else's feelings.

Almost all the reporters in Ms. Melly's class said they enjoyed the book and thought it would be a good book for students in kindergarten to fourth grades.

They said other people will enjoy this book if they like animals and animal sounds.

They also said that "Can I Join Your Club?" is good for people to learn about how to include others in a group. The book also teaches about being kind.

The reporters suggested that this book would be a good book for DePaul's Peace Room.