One day at Topeka High School, sophomore Jack Hishmeh was walking down a back hallway and he saw a classroom with about 20 special students. Some had cerebral palsy. Others had Down Syndrome. They seemed stuck in that room—Room 116.

So Jack went in and said, “Hello.” He immediately realized that these students were eager for friendship. For the most part, the other students in the school did not notice them or avoided them. Some even bullied the special needs students. That was why the special needs students stayed in Room 116 for lunch.

Jack knew he had to do something. He went to the special needs teacher, Claudia Shover-Daly, and asked how he could have time with the students. She said, “How about you start with lunch?” Jack gave up eating in the cafeteria and started going to Room 116 for lunch. Before long, some of Jack’s friends joined him. By the end of the spring semester, Jack and his friends were the “Lunch Buddies.” They paired up with the special needs students and took them to the cafeteria where they had lunch with everybody else.

But the story doesn’t end there. The next year the “Lunch Buddies” started a group called “Special Opps”—short for Special Opportunities. The group now has 40 members and its own T-shirts. In addition to going to lunch, Special Opps provides activities and games that are accessible for all students. They also take special needs students to sporting events and school plays. Says teacher Shover-Daly: “My students have become a lot happier ever since Jack Hishmeh started his program, and it makes me feel invigorated.”

The Topeka-Capital Journal carried a story about the Special Opps—and the Associated Press picked it up. Students from other schools started a “Special Opps.” For Jack and his friends their next step was to do a makeover of Room 116. Now it no longer resembles a storage room.