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Non-Random Acts of Kindness

By Cathy Dausman



Heidi Felt holding the iKind T-shirt Photo Cathy Dausman

It began last May with a simple question: how to recruit more Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School staff to mentor the peer leadership groups already in place.

With the Safe School Ambassadors program starting its sixth year, counselor Heidi Felt and others brainstormed on ways to expand teacher involvement for that small group support system. The first question, Felt said, quickly led to a second, more fundamental query: "Why can't everyone just be nice?"

We do a lot of looking for what's wrong, she said; why not look for kindness? "Middle school kids are like a kaleidoscope," Felt said, because "everything's changing." That leaves many students feeling vulnerable, exposed and especially sensitive to bullying in its many forms.

At that age they'd rather be cool than be kind, she said. The group, comprised of principal Joan Danilson, Felt, outgoing PTA president Stacy Giglio and former Joaquin Moraga student Debbie Ruiter, kicked around ideas for a name. They considered "be kind" using a bee instead of "be." Then they hit on iKind, and the name stuck.

The iKind concept was originally presented to the teaching staff last May. It was introduced to the student

body this month during a school-wide assembly featuring the screening of "Finding Kind." Filmmakers and friends Lauren Parsekian and Molly Thompson travelled across the U.S. for more than two years to make their award-winning independent film festival presentation on the effects of bullying in young girls' lives.

"You could have heard a pin drop" during the movie, Felt said. "Even [Moraga School District superintendent] Bruce Burns couldn't believe how quiet the students were."

The staff worked hard to prep both genders for the assembly to counter the notion that the movie addressed only a "girl problem."

"Before their assembly, we held a conference call to make sure their assemblies were designed for both males and females. [Parsekian and Thompson] have been in over 500 schools since 2009 and [we] felt confident our student and staff would find value for all students," said Felt. "The post-film interactive session was definitely co-ed."

Parsekian and Thompson handed each audience member three cards to complete. The first was a pledge card, or promise to end bullying; the second was an apology card to give to someone you had offended; the third, a "kind" card to share. The kind cards were then posted on a "kind wall" banner, iKind T-shirts are in evidence on campus - black tees for staff members, white tees for students; each complete with a tiny "JM" where the trademark logo would go - and iKind announcements are made via PA system and decorated Kind Card boxes populate classrooms making it, as one poster puts it, "kool" to be kind.

"The ["Finding Kind"] messages were powerful," said sixth grade core teacher Dawn Lezak. "The proof that it was good for me was that I talked about it at length with my family and friends."

Danilson said the iKind program aligns with district and school goals by supporting socio-emotional development in a safe and healthy environment.

"I love that [kindness] is a subtle idea," Felt said. "I wish we'd thought of it 10 years ago."

Details about the movie and the kindness campaign can be found online at www.findingkind.com.

JM Students Respond to Bullying Film and iKind Program

A cross section of sixth, seventh and eighth graders, both boys and girls, responded via e-mail to Lamorinda Weekly with their thoughts on the "Finding Kind" assembly and iKind program. Their responses appear in edited versions below:

"Recently, a group of classmates have been rather unkind to me. They [shall] go unnamed," said eighth grader Brigitte Jia. She brought the group's actions to the attention of her counselor and the school's vice principal.

Conor O'Brien, seventh grade, said he was made fun of "on the way to the movie." But "the person who bullied me made a kind card apologizing [afterwards]. He felt really sorry that he [bullied] me."

Amy Flett, sixth grade, saw the movie with her mother before it was shown at Joaquin Moraga. She said her mother was happy "that a bunch of moms and daughters saw the movie together and that we could talk about it after," and thinks "about half" her fellow students are putting the change in attitude into practice.

Maggie O'Connor was "shocked and hurt" by a recent episode of peer unkindness directed at her. "The film made my mom sad about what girls are going through today," she said.

Eighth grade student Ben Miller said the movie did not affect him as a boy, but did admit "everybody can be unkind no matter their age or gender." Miller was unfazed when a best friend recently called him a name. "Everyone

does that and no one really means it," he said.

Eighth grader David Gomez Siu considers Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School "a very safe place to learn and grow," but said "everybody is mean at one point or another." The real difference is how it is dealt with, he said. "Girls usually hold grudges for long periods of time, whereas boys usually make up fairly quickly."

Chase Giglio, sixth grade, was surprised to learn so many people had been bullied. "Sometimes bullying doesn't seem like such a big deal just one time, but when it happens repetitively, it can be really depressing for people," he said. "Probably 60 percent are buying into this attitude change, the others think it's 'lame' because they are not the ones getting bullied."

Viewing the movie left sixth grader Allie Appleton "in tears." "To know Lauren tried to kill herself ... that's just really sad," she said. "Bullying is sad and needs to stop."

"Many people in the movie said that they wished they could go back in time and change how they had treated someone. [That] made me not want to have to think back and regret something," said eighth grader Aaron Moranville.

"A lot of times, people [bully others] unknowingly," said eighth grader Kate Ginley. "But I always remember that they are just words, they can't affect you unless you let it get to you. Being unkind is a choice, not something that comes with gender."

"It kind of scares me to think that I could do something or write something that could really hurt someone else in such a big way," said Jessalyn Simon-Parker, eighth grade.

Classmate Isabel Artiaga thinks bullying "is definitely a phase that people go through, especially at this age. It was kind of funny to see people who are usually so mean walk up to each other and start apologizing," adding that girls "can be your best friend one day, then a mean text or something else comes along, and suddenly we are enemies and don't talk to each other for two years."

She believes eighth graders at least are buying into this 'iKind' campaign, "because we have had some forms of bullying over the past three years, and most people are starting to realize that it's really okay to be yourself!" - C. Dausman

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