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Challenge for Mt. Diablo High School students

By Dana Guzzetti

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Mt. Diablo High School was one of only 10 schools from across the nation chosen for a Challenge Day assembly presentation, and more than 650 students, faculty and staff participated in the transformational experience.

The presentation is a powerful hour-and-15-minute experience that is designed to cut through cliques and prejudices, replacing them with compassion and insight. Challenge Day leaders work to create a safe, trusting environment where people are encouraged to "get real" about their own lives, and the lives of others.

"I have never seen any program in education that can change the school so quickly. Usually things are long term," remarked Milt Panagotacos, teacher and conflict management coordinator at Mt. Diablo High. "These kids grow up a little faster. They are not coddled. They mature faster and they are strong."

Conflict at Mt. Diablo has been an issue, but incidents have dropped by two-thirds over the past three years, he said.

After the assembly Nov. 20, clusters of students walked out of the gymnasium with the look of coming out into the daylight after watching a heart-rending film.

"I think it is just wonderful," said Araceli, a Mt. Diablo High student and Challenge Day supporter. "They find out that life is not just about themselves."

It was requested that students' last names not be used in this story.

"Notice," "Choose (something different)" and "Action" are touchstones for the facilitated workshop program.

"We get real, learn compassion and empathy, and that words hurt," said leader Sela Gaglia. "The workshops help students find that they share much in common with others that they may have felt were different or unacceptable in some way."

After Gaglia's relaxing upbeat introduction to begin the assembly, she asked if anyone in the audience had experienced the pain of social oppression, collectively or individually. Hands shot up in the audience.

Gaglia assures onlookers that they will soon "see that the impacts of those experiences separate us, and we will learn to empathize with each other and step into new possibilities."

With that, leader Vinny Ferraro begins to roam the room, microphone in hand. Each vivid detail of Ferraro's emotionally and physically violent childhood unravels through the intense, compelling story.

"I led a double life," Ferraro begins.

A hush falls over the crowd as they listen to how he became a joking, cavalier, bad guy among his school friends. But all the while, he was hiding the fearful, lonely boy who hated his abusive, criminal father, and tried to protect his addicted mother at home.

"I was filled with guilt, hate and loneliness," Ferraro said.

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After his mother's death, while his father was in prison; the young man ended up on the streets and eventually in jail.

"I became what I hated," Ferraro dramatically concludes.

A film depicting a past Challenge Day is shown next. Students in the film were asked to step forward across a line if they had been hurt by others. A white student in the film said he suddenly saw the pain he had been inflicting on a black friend. Soon everyone was across the line for one reason or another.

"We want to reach as many as possible to give them a glimpse that they are important and that they are the ones who have the power to change," Gaglia said. "People are like icebergs, we see the top 10 percent."

Gaglia and Ferraro, self-described "hard-center" leaders from diverse backgrounds, challenged those at the assembly to personally acknowledge similar wounds that they may have suffered by a show of hands or by standing up, as Gaglia enumerated various types of insults or injuries.

By the end of the program, students appeared to be dazed, sitting briefly before silently leaving the building, some in groups stopping along the way to hug each other.

"We prepare for Challenge Day," said Panagotacos. "We have counselors on site for any kid who is addressing serious issues, such as suicide, running away, abuse or cutting."

This was the fifth Challenge Day event at Mt. Diablo High School and Panagotacos now has 30 students who are trained conflict mediators, some of whom are the products of a Challenge Day assembly. Panagotacos noted that a "calm on campus" usually

follows these events.

E.J., a senior who helps produce the Challenge Day events, explains it.

"When I first came to Challenge Day, I did not know what to expect. I went to get out of class," he said.

Mt. Diablo High has greater challenges than some area schools, said Panagotacos.

"Eight bus loads of teens commute from Bay Point daily; 70 percent of students qualify for free lunch; kids come to school from shelters, group homes and cars; and we have a high population of immigrants and special education students," he detailed.

Challenge Day provides students with a heightened awareness.

"I realized that some parents are not involved. They are the last to know," said Elana, a student at the school.

"If parents knew how rewarding it is to be here with these kids, they would be here," added Raquel, another student.

Parental involvement is an issue at the school, but there is a small, loyal core of supportive parents and several of them attended the Challenge Day assembly.

"The overall success of a student comes from everybody that is part of the student's life being involved," said Michelle Turner, Parent Teacher Student Association president. "As a parent, it is my responsibility to be here."

"My three kids have graduated," added Laurel Gude, three-time PTSA past president. "I am back because I

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love all of these kids. They are part of my family."

When Principal Beverly Hansen first asked Panagotacos if he wanted to do a Challenge Day, he said that he hesitated, not knowing what to expect.

"After that (first Challenge Day), I asked her if we could do more," Panagotacos explained.

Hansen's reply was "yes," but Panagotacos had to find the \$25,000 to pay for all of the assemblies for the last four years. Panagotacos found the funding from the Student Body Leadership Club, Digital Safari Academy, and Workability, a grant program for special education students.

Challenge Day is an international nonprofit organization that began 21 years ago and is headquartered in Concord.

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