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# Students, educators embrace 'Next Step' in making positive change

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By MEG FRASER

Taking a cue from Ghandi, Yvonne and Rich Dutra-St. John have inspired students and teachers across the country –and the world – to “Be the change” through their Challenge Day program. Warwick students got a dose of the movement last week when the founders visited Pilgrim High School.

Challenge Day is an all-day workshop that celebrates diversity and empowers students to not only act as leaders in their community, but to experience the power of love both for oneself and for others. Pilgrim has participated in Challenge Day for the past two years and was the first school in the state to take part. The Patriots soon spread word to Warwick Vets, and with Assistant Principal Don Miller at the helm, Challenge Day activities are sure to continue in Warwick.

“Challenge Day’s objectives are really for students and teachers alike to get a better understanding of one another,” Miller said. “It’s an opportunity for people to get real.”

Last week, participants got more than a day’s worth of change, however, as the Challenge Day founders conducted a two-day program called Next Step.

“It’s Challenge Day to the extreme,” Miller explained.

While each Challenge Day sees a new batch of students, faculty and administrators, Next Step takes a smaller group for both days with the same objective.

“We try to get a representation of the whole student body and it works best when everybody is involved at every level,” said participant Jim Kennedy, who is a health teacher at Vets.

Featured on Oprah, Challenge Day – and by extension Next Step – charges people to adopt a formula for creating positive change that revolves around “notice, choose, act,” a step-by-step method that requires thought before action and a heightened awareness of other people and their feelings.

One of the activities during Next Step entails blindfolding a participant and having everyone else give them compliments as a reminder of how important it is to appreciate other people and yourself. At another point during Friday’s final day of activities, participants on both sides of a line of tape were asked to step forward every time a scenario, like racism, for example, applied to them.

“When they start to realize ‘I’m not alone,’ it creates this bond you can’t put into words,” Miller said.

“The point is to look and realize how similar we are,” added Pilgrim Spanish teacher Kelly Taft. “You start to recognize you may be closer to that person than the person you’ve known for 20 years.”

Part of the object of the programming is so that teachers and administrators are at the same level as students, and also so students no longer depend on preconceived ideas to define one another. A mantra of both Yvonne and Rich Dutra-St. John is to “drop the water line.”

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Wearing a “Be the Change” T-shirt, Taft explained that the founders liken people to icebergs in that they keep much of their personalities beneath the surface. Icebergs show only 10 percent of their total mass, while 90 percent remains underwater, and Taft urges her students to “drop the water line” and live a more honest, complete life.

“Nobody wants to live a 10 percent life,” she said, pausing to hug other adult facilitators at the day’s end.

“There’s a lot of hugs and lots of tears,” she said.

Taft saw the Challenge Day episode of Oprah and approached Miller about implementing the concept. It turned out that the assistant principal had already been in contact with the program coordinators, so it was a natural fit for Taft to get involved. Then she learned about Dutra-St. John’s concept of each person carrying “balloons” of negative energy or frustration that leak onto those who are close to us.

“Everyone in the room was emotional because everyone has stuff in their balloon,” she said.

Last year, Warwick schools employed an advisory period for students that take place at 10 a.m., where teachers meet with 12 to 15 students for 20 minutes out of the day. Taft uses that time to try and implement some of the activities she has learned through Challenge Day and Next Step.

In “if you really knew me,” for example, students reveal facts about themselves that weigh on their minds and self-esteem.

“If you haven’t taken care of you first, how can we expect them to learn?” she asked. “If they’re not talking to us, we can’t help them.”

Educators like Taft and Miller believe that the feeling of isolation is a problem for students, and misconduct, drug and alcohol use or bullying are all symptoms of this larger issue. Now in his ninth year as an educator, Kennedy agreed, explaining that while children and adults alike are often skeptical of the program, once you’ve experienced it, you carry the message with you.

“It’s so amazing to watch them open up to it,” he said, explaining that the real challenge is taking that group of participants and giving them the tools to teach others throughout the entire year.

“Initially there was probably some hesitancy, but once they’re in that door people are like, ‘Thank you so much,’” agreed Miller.

Pilgrim and Vets will host their next joint Challenge Day in December, and organizers strongly believe they will have no problem filling up the seats.

In the meantime, organizers hope the Next Step participants will carry what they learned with them year-round.

“Until you’re actually sitting in the room you can’t believe what happens,” Taft said. “The best way to implement it to a large group of people is to start with a small group of people and pay it forward.”