The Romeo Kiwanis Club donated a big check for a program that has had a big impact on students at Romeo High School during the past decade.

At the April 21 Romeo Community Schools Board of Education meeting, Kiwanis member Dean Maue presented the board with a $3,000 donation toward helping to sponsor Challenge Day next year.

"If you guys had a chance to actually talk with somebody who has been through it, I think they would tell you about how important it is for our school district," RHS teacher David Robertson told the board.

Challenge Day is a program put in practice by schools across the country to help break through cliques, stereotypes and perceptions within school dynamics through a daylong process.
It is a program that has been going on at Romeo High School for 10 years and will take place Dec. 8-9 of the 2014-15 school year.

At RHS, 100 students and 25 adults participate in a "lock-in" experience for an entire day devoid of cell phones or outside interference. The group does a variety of exercises and holds discussions to "demonstrate the possibility of love and connection through the celebration of diversity, truth and full expression," according to literature.

For Robertson, who also runs a conflict resolution program at RHS, it is a day where conflicts both large and small can be discussed and brought to light through constructive dialogue and a positive construct.

"The big results came in giving kids a chance to express their thoughts and feelings," Robertson said of past events. "First in small groups, then many students used the large group to talk to everyone, and some relationships were healed and some peace of mind was spoken."

It may seem vague on the surface, but the results can be attested to by both students and parents at RHS.

"It was something that not only made a difference in me as a student, but also in my career pathway," wrote one student in an evaluation. "It is something I will carry with me for the rest of my life."

A parent wrote, "It was one of the most gut-wrenching, heart-warming experiences and I've been honored to be a part of it."

Robertson was an intern in the RHS counseling office in 2004 when he implemented a peer mediation program, which remains ongoing.

He trains students to mediate conflict with their peers and has trained 50 students this year alone. The program has helped mediate close to 1,000 situations during the past decade, before the issues need to be brought before administrators or counselors.

A former student wrote of the effect Challenge Day had on her upon returning to RHS after an incident.

"After returning to RHS after being stabbed, I never felt so alone and misunderstood. My PTSD had me constantly looking over my shoulder in fear of what might happen to me next. I didn't feel safe at school anymore," she wrote in a testimonial. "Challenge Day
opened my eyes to how many of my fellow peers are struggling to go to school because of fear of being bullied and harassed. It's been nearly seven years since my first Challenge Day and I still always accept people for who they are, I still always tell my loved ones how much they mean to me, and perhaps most importantly, I still always strive to be the change I wish to see in our community."

One student summed up how she dealt with the uncertainty of the program at the outset.

"I was a complete wreck because I was so nervous. However, once I got to actually relax and realize the true meaning behind it, I understood why older people I knew had encouraged me to do it myself."

Last year Kiwanis donated $5,000 to the program, and has contributed to several programs at all levels in RCS and the Romeo area.

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