

## Delaware schools: 'If You Really Knew Kirk'

A year after a student died, middle schoolers honor his memory

By KELLY BOTHUM • The News Journal • January 9, 2011

John Sullivan was not the most popular kid at Kirk Middle School. He did not dress like everyone else, and he did not always think like them, either. That made him a target for teasing and bullying from classmates who made fun of his slicked-back hair, quiet demeanor and big glasses.

But when the 13-year-old died in a bike accident in November 2009, even the kids who bullied him were stung by the loss. One year after his death, a group of John's classmates came up with a way to honor his memory and encourage their peers to be more accepting of each other.

Working with Kirk social studies teacher Karen Hruz and guidance counselor Clayton Washington, the group of 12 students created "If You Really Knew Kirk." Based on the popular MTV show, "If You Really Knew Me," which challenges teenagers to break down social barriers and confront bullying, the team organized and put on a presentation for eighth-graders tackling four thorny issues facing middle schoolers: grief, acceptance, family and bullying.

"We came up with the idea that everyone has a story," said Victoria Kinna, 13, who was part of the group. "There are people here who are going through things we don't know about."

Many shared personal stories about losing parents and other loved ones, feeling like an outcast at school and the constant pressure of juggling academic, social and family demands. One student talked about how constant ridicule from classmates over the way she walked caused her to cut herself.

Despite their individual differences, students found a striking similarity in how they felt.

"It was eye-opening," Victoria said.

In a survey distributed after the presentation, 98 percent of eighth-graders said the program was helpful, Washington said. Based on its success, there are plans for the group to present the program to the school's sixth- and seventh-graders. There also has been interest in having kids present at other middle schools in the district.

"The great thing about this is that they came to us with these ideas. We had kids sharing stuff they never talked about before. It really took some courage on their part," Washington said. "Once they started, it was like dominoes -- it just spread."

The program was a fitting tribute to John, who was not afraid to stand up for other kids when they were being teased, said Jasmine Bradley, a classmate who jump-started the project by reminding students about the anniversary of his death. John was hit by a car outside the entrance to Christiana Town Center while riding his bike on Nov. 9, 2009. While crossing between traffic on Del. 273, his bike was struck by a minivan.



Jasmine, who had written the anniversary day on her calendar so she would not forget, shared the news with classmates in Hruz's AVID class, which is geared toward students who are planning to attend college after high school. The class began sharing stories about John and talking about bullying's harmful effects.

"I just took my lesson plan, put it aside and left it unfold from the kids," Hruz said.

From there, memories morphed into something more.

In addition to "If You Really Knew Kirk," students presented the Sullivan family with more than \$1,000 in cash, food and toys in time for Christmas. The money and gifts were the result of donations from students, teachers and local community organizations.

Washington said fundraising efforts are continuing, but students hope the real legacy of their efforts will be a decrease in bullying at the school.

"I think it changed me, and it changed them," Hruz said. "And I think it changed Kirk."



Click link below:

[How Delaware Kids Stand Up to Bullying](http://governor.blogs.delaware.gov/2011/09/24/if-you-really-knew-kirk-how-delaware-kids-stand-up-to-bullying/) – to see students anti-bullying video State of Delaware Governor's Blog

<http://governor.blogs.delaware.gov/2011/09/24/if-you-really-knew-kirk-how-delaware-kids-stand-up-to-bullying/>