

'NARRATIVES OF COURAGE'

Valley View students learn perseverance through program

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WATCHUNG – Valley View School students were invited to “listen, learn and love” in the latest iteration of the school’s biennial Narratives of Courage assembly program.

The assembly program brought an astounding array of perspectives to the middle school students on Wednesday, May 16.

The kids heard presentations from the brother of “Unabomber” Ted Kaczynski, who turned in the terrorist to the authorities; the daughter of a victim of the tragic shooting at a Charleston, S.C., church in 2016; a journalist who lived in Iraq under the regime of Saddam Hussein, and more.

The entire student body spent the school day hearing these remarkable stories of how individuals overcame the obstacles they faced, and how they used the negative experiences to have a positive impact in the lives of others.

Fittingly, the theme of this year’s Narratives of Courage program is “Reflections of Hope.”

‘An Amazing Day’

“It is really an amazing day and one that is remembered by the students long after they leave Valley View,” said Board of Education President Margo Langer. “I think that the program allows the students to hear raw and emotional but incredibly inspiring stories of individuals who have faced adversity and then made a choice to use that experience to advocate, volunteer and work to make the world a better and safer place. The students are also given messages about self confidence and the power of the choices that they make.”

Langer said she is amazed at how receptive the students are during the presentations.

“I am always so impressed by the incredible attention paid by the students – you can hear a pin drop – and then by the amazing and insightful questions that are asked by the students,” said Langer. “It is an honor and a privilege to have this program in our school. I think



Photos by Eric Hostettler

Valley View School students gathered in the All-Purpose Room for an introduction to the guest speakers at the 2018 “Narratives of Courage” program on Wednesday, May 16.

all of those individuals who support and organize this program.”

Motivational speaker Scott Chesney kicked off the event.

Chesney, who was paralyzed at the age of 15, has gone on to use his story to motivate more than one million children across the world to “live to the fullest.”

He set the tone for the remainder of the speakers by encouraging the students to put their all into what they do on a daily basis, and to always believe in themselves no matter the difficulties along the way.

“What might be your best today might be your better tomorrow in knowing full well that you gave it your all,” he said. “Whatever it is that you’re doing, try to find enjoyment in it because that is going to give you energy, it’s going to give you enthusiasm, it’s going to give you a reason to go on.”

Making The Rounds

After Chesney’s introduction and a performance by the Valley View School Band, classes at each grade level went into a rotating schedule of four sessions. Each session lasted 50 minutes and gave the students the chance to hear each of the 12 speakers’ stories.

Students had the opportunity to ask questions and learn more about each speaker’s message.

In addition to Chesney, the speakers and their presentations were as follows:

- Pianist Daryl Davis pre-

sented on his experience in meeting with several different branches of the Ku Klux Klan and his journey to find the driving factors behind the group’s worldview.

- Jacy Good, and her husband Steve Johnson, presented about the dangers of texting and driving and how the act of sending a single text message can ruin so many lives. Good was partially paralyzed in a car accident – caused by a young man who was texting and driving – that took the lives of her parents on the day of her college graduation in 2008.

- David Kaczynski, the brother of the “Unabomber” Ted Kaczynski, shared the story of his struggle to turn in his brother after discovering his connection to the series of bombings. He discussed the “moral responsibility” he had to share this information with authorities and subsequently to help his brother, and several others later in his life, to avoid the death penalty.

- Arno Michaelis told the tale of how his daughter and the help of those he hated turned his life around – from being a “racist skinhead” to a motivational speaker who preaches diversity and gratitude for life.

- Haider Newmani presented on his experience living under the rule of Saddam Hussein during multiple wars, and what it was like to tell the stories of soldiers and rebel fighters as an ac-

complished journalist years later.

- Ali Nourbakhsh, of Rachel’s Challenge, told the story of Rachel Scott, the first victim of the Columbine High School shooting, and how her life and writings helped create their program. The program preaches school security and the importance of standing up to violence as students.

- Sharon Riser – the daughter of one of the victims of the Charleston, S.C., church shooting – shared her difficult story of loss and her duty to speak on topics such as gun control and racism in America.

- Sarri Singer presented on her decision to move to Israel after the Sept. 11 attacks to aid victims of terror, and her subsequent experience surviving a suicide bombing while in Jerusalem. Singer shared how difficult it can be to experience something so traumatic, and has dedicated her life to helping those with psychological needs as a result of terrorism.

- Bill and Deborah Streiter told their story of loss and tragedy in losing their two children to a drunk driving accident. The Streiters stressed how important it is to keep hope alive and to stay strong for the people around you as well as those you have lost.

- Jeffrey Veatch shared the story of losing his 17-year-old son to drug overdose and how it inspired him to change the

attitudes of young people on the dangers of drugs.

- Paul Wichansky told students about living life with cerebral palsy and how he’s never let it stop him from achieving all of his dreams, including helping others believe in themselves.

Each class had the chance to hear from several of the speakers, with the seventh

and eighth grade classes receiving some additional presentations. Students watched videos and listen to first-hand accounts of the presenters as they shared their individual messages.

After all four sessions of speakers, Chesney led a reflection period that gave students a chance to discuss all they had learned over the course of the day.