

## 'Mr. Peace' encourages students to find goodness in everyone to stop bullying

by Dan Sanderson-Staff Writer

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A young man known as "Mr. Peace" ran out of gas on his way to speak to Crawford AuSable School District students last week, but he did not fail to energize the youth with a message of kindness and tolerance.

Kevin "Mr. Peace" Szawala is a motivational speaker, author, hip-hop artist and peace activist. Born in Detroit, Szawala started his motivational speaking business called "Being Who I Want 2 Be" in 2006.

Szawala spoke to students at the Grayling High School (GHS), Grayling Middle School and fourth and fifth graders at the Grayling Elementary School last Thursday. His visit was prompted by an address Szawala gave to the GHS Student Senate during a summer retreat last year.

Szawala's mission was to address the topic of bullying, which occurs in the hallways and on busses in school districts across the nation, sometimes resulting in the suicide of bullied students.

The Grayling Middle School has 375 students. Each day, 160,000 students across the nation do not attend school due to bullying.

"That would be like closing 400 schools about this size," Szawala said.

Szawala engaged the students throughout his presentation. He asked the students and teachers when they experienced the most painful time in their lives.

Szawala then used a cup of water to explain how painful words, acts and judgments can overflow as time goes on.

"Something that was 10 years ago, you remembered like it was yesterday," Szawala said.

Szawala used a basketball during his presentation. He asked the students to imagine that it was a bowling ball and a pile of their expensive I-Phones, I-Pads and video game systems were placed in front of him. Szawala slammed the ball onto the gym floor, in an effort to show how he was smashing their expensive gadgets to bits.

In response, students told Szawala they would punch him, beat him up to the more comical, "making him suffer through a Justin Bieber concert."

Szawala asked the students to explain the attributes of their best friends. He then offered to give a student a \$20 bill. After Szawala crumpled up the bill, stomped on it and said he would desecrate it every way possible, the students said they still saw the value in the money.



Above, Kevin "Mr. Peace" Szawala energized Grayling High School, Grayling Middle School and fourth and fifth graders at the Grayling Elementary School with a message of kindness and tolerance last Thursday. Photo by Dan Sanderson

Szawala encouraged them to see the inner-goodness in all students and to treat them all the same.

"Treat everybody like you treat your best friend and do that 100 percent of the time," Szawala said.

Szawala concluded his talk, relaying a story of a motivational speaker, who addressed a school in California with 2,000 students. At the assembly, a paraplegic girl struggled to make her way to the microphone. When she finally made it, she said, "I love that boy," referring to the popular quarterback of the football team. The entire student body erupted into laughter. Instead of joining in, the student athlete went and hugged the girl. The rest of the students followed suit, each hugging her over a two-hour period.

"That's all it takes to lift someone up into the skies or to cut them down to nothing," Szawala said.

Grayling Middle School student Rose Griffin said bullying is a topic that needed to be addressed.

"It was a much needed talk," she said. "Bullying is bad. I hate bullying."

Dillion Messenheimer was also impressed.

"I thought it was really quite inspirational," he said.

Grayling Middle School student Karlie Wilson was pleased someone was brought to the community to address bullying.

"I thought it was really good," Wilson said. "It means a lot that people will stand up against bullying others."

Szawala had a roller coaster ride of a day last week, since he ran out of gas nearing Roscommon. He ran to get gas in order to make his speaking commitments in Grayling.

"It's been amazing," The kids have reached out so much today. They're going through a lot of pain in their lives for sure. Seeing them come up to me afterwards and say it had an impact on their heart and they're going to treat people better because of it, that's what keeps me fulfilled and keeps me going."

Crawford AuSable Schools Superintendent Joe Powers said the school district has had an anti-bullying policy for several years.

Michigan lawmakers recently passed legislation, mandating that all school districts adopt anti-bullying policies.

Powers said a public hearing would be held at the Crawford AuSable School Board's meeting in April to make a few changes to its policy to meet state requirements.

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