

'Mr. Peace' to St. Mary students: Have courage to stand up against bullies



Kevin Szawala, also known as Mr. Peace, engages students at St. Mary School in Griffith during a presentation on bullying on Oct. 8. A Catholic youth minister from Michigan, Szawala addressed two assemblies of the school. (Steve Euvino photo)

By Steve Euvino, Northwest Indiana Catholic, October 8, 2014

GRIFFITH, IN – Kevin Szawala recalled when his second-grade soccer team lost a game when the other team scored as time expired. Afterward, nearly every member of the losing team encircled the goalie and ridiculed him for allowing the late goal. One player who did not ridicule the goalie was Szawala. He did nothing but watch as teammates made fun of his friend.

Today, a Catholic youth minister from St. James Church in Novi, Michigan, Szawala hopes no one follows his example. Instead, Szawala said Oct. 8 at St. Mary School, young people need to show courage in the face of bullies.

Jesus gave us courage to do the right thing,” Szawala told two school assemblies. “You have the power to change hearts. ... That’s what Jesus would want you to do.”

Speaking as Mr. Peace, Szawala addressed bullying for a Mobile Ed Productions presentation. According to the Mobile Ed website, bullying leads to low self-esteem, health issues, poor grades, and even suicidal thoughts.

Rebecca Maskovich, SMS principal, said the school has hosted other anti-bullying programs in recent years. “We want students to be nice to each other, to respect each other,” Maskovich said. “We want students to see differences in others and get along.”

For young people, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines bullying as any “unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated.”

According to the CDC, a young person can be a perpetrator, a victim, or both.

Szawala said many bullies are hurting inside. Inviting students to draw an enlarged heart, Szawala then had them fill the heart with blue marks representing bad experiences. Just as a cup with too much liquid overflows, a heart with too much negativity can spill onto others in the form of bad behavior, including bullying.

“The heart is so full of pain, there’s no room for love,” Szawala said. “Jesus wants us to love our neighbors, not just the ones who live near us.” St. Mary students described their best friends as those who stick up for them, play with them, and say nice things about them. No one mentioned material things.

“You don’t care about that stuff,” Szawala said. “You just want to feel happy.”

When you look at someone, Szawala said, don’t focus on the exterior; look at the person’s heart instead.

Treat everyone like your best friend, Szawala said. If you are being bullied, courteously ask the bully to stop. If you witness a bullying, speak up. Using the example of trying to put shaving cream back in its can, Szawala said it’s equally difficult to undo an unkind act or words. “It gets very messy,” Szawala said. “The idea is not to let it happen in the first place.”

Araceli Magana, a St. Mary eighth-grader, said bullying is not a “big deal” at her school. “We all get along,” she said. “I was new here in sixth grade, and the girls accepted me and called me over during lunch to sit with them.”

Szawala has been giving talks since 2006, saying, “I keep learning and growing with every talk.” With every anti-bullying talk he hears more students’ sad stories, and “it becomes so powerful.”

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