

Students Deliver Powerful Think B4 You Speak Message



University School student leaders favor freedom of speech; they just want people to realize that what they say has impact.

“As a journalist, I am all for freedom of speech,” said moderator and USchool Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) president Mason Roth. “If you want to say a word, go for it, but be cognizant. And if you’re in a situation that doesn’t really require you to say offensive words, don’t.”

The student-run assembly keeps USchool at the forefront of a national movement to address stereotypes and negatively-used terms that scar countless children.

Banding together to spread the word were representatives of Bosom Buddies (students who foster one-on-one friendships with developmentally disabled), FRAT (students who promote Autism awareness), GSA (students who strive for safety and support for all students), Special Olympics (students who advocate for and support special-needs persons) and Scholar-Athletes (who play one or a number of different sports).

On par with the club officials’ professionally-executed presentation were insightful remarks from audience members. Here are few excerpts from the assembly’s free exchange:

“In a few years we’re going to enter the world and be grown-ups. We are going to be an example to kids in our place. The world I want to live in is one where everyone can walk down the street and embrace the people around them, the diversity. Where no one is going to be called ‘retard’, or ‘fag’ or any other demeaning term. Where the shy kids don’t have to lock themselves in their room and cry because they don’t have any friends. A place where people can be happy pretty much all of the time.”

“This isn’t about tolerating people who are different. This is about accepting people because they are in your community. Everyone is different and I know that sort of sounds cliché, but every single one of us has something that can put you into a stereotype.”

“It’s sad when you have to try to find the good in yourself because of what others say.”

“My sister has Asperger’s, and it does hurt her a lot when people call her stupid when she’s not.”

“I have had experiences where an adult will come up to me and ask me where I’m going to college, and if I say a [Division] 1 School, they automatically assume that I’m [only going there because I’m] playing a sport. I have no intentions of playing a sport when I go to college, and it’s hurtful to me because I feel that’s all people think I can do. Yes, I’m athletic, but I’m also part of visual arts; I do other things.”

“Ever since the human dignity summit I have realized that people are more comfortable talking about this topic. It is a great change to see.”

“I feel even just having a GSA is a big improvement in our community.”

“If everybody could just extend a hand to one another and love each other as a fellow human, we could all promote a little empathy for all.”

Assembly leaders who originally prepared a student Q&A panel were encouraged by the unexpected turn of events.

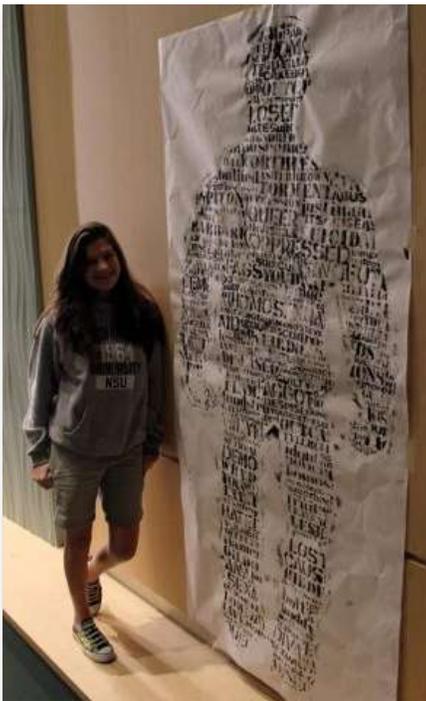
“The assembly became this open forum, which I think was a nice surprise,” commented GSA vice president Sarah Goldberg. “I am glad that students felt so comfortable. Everyone said something beneficial.”

“I think [students] really understood the message coming from kids,” added Special Olympics Club president Meredith Adams. “My brother is a special-needs person, so hearing someone use an offensive term for no reason other than to point out someone’s flaw is wrong.”

USchool teacher Dr. Tara Ellsley, who served as a resource for assembly presenters, agreed that students are often the best ones to determine how to reach each other. She also noted that when presented with opportunities and support, students can develop skills that will help them during and beyond their college years.

“I saw students who are leaders of their clubs shine as they rose to the role of school leader,” Ellsley said. “I find it gratifying to watch the students grow, and I am grateful to be a part of this learning community.”

Championing the national movement against bullying and name calling by creating forums for frank discourse and participating in advocacy clubs are two ways USchool students are serving as positive change agents for the greater community. Other students moved by horrifying headlines and calls to action are delivering the message by different, yet equally powerful means.



Kali Rosendo created a short film that showed a young man deleting a hurtful comment from Facebook after watching a series of tragic news clips. Ironically, the pain inflicted by her lead actor is one that he has experienced firsthand.

“He was really receptive to [the video’s concept],” Rosendo said. “He goes to a different school, and I think he sometimes gets taunted and bullied [for being involved] in the performing arts. He understands the necessity of the message.”

Yet another visually-powerful reminder of how words harm was Harley Dante’s art piece titled “Playground”.

“It’s all about bullying, and I feel like that starts when you’re a little kid at the playground and you get bullied for little kid things. Then as you get older... you’re getting called all these names and you don’t know how to react. This is just like the shadow of a bully standing over you and all the different, hateful names they call you. It’s six-feet [tall], so it’s overpowering,” Dante explained. “I’m against bullying, so after Human Dignity week I was like ‘ok, it’s time to do something and show people it’s time to stop it’.”

Goldberg echoed Dante’s sentiment: “I feel that people are stepping up more, and that is what will stop [harmful tendencies] -- when the majority starts to say ‘this isn’t right’ and does something.”