

Stand for the Silent speaks out against bullying

BY SPENCER FOUST
Staff Writer

In an age where bullying is pervasive among students across the country, one organization is working to bring awareness to the bullying epidemic and the damage it causes.

Last Thursday night, nearly 100 Kirksville area students and parents gathered in the auditorium of William Matthew Middle School to hear Kirk Smalley deliver a speech about bullying. Smalley founded the Stand for the Silent organization in 2010 after the death of his stepson, Ty Smalley. Ty, who Kirk described as “always smiling,” took his own life May 13, 2010, after being suspended for retaliating against his bully. He was at the end of his sixth grade and 11 years old.

In the auditorium, Smalley’s appearance was less of a speech and more of a conversation. Smalley frequently received loud, emphatic answers from the crowd and encouraged those who could see him struggling to hold up the American Sign Language gesture for “I love you.” For what seemed like difficult parts of the story to tell, Smalley found an empty seat in the audience and used it to speak face-to-face with someone next to him.

“Nobody wants their kid to be 11 forever — because right there, that’s forever,” Smalley said as he raised a shaking finger to Ty’s shrine on the stage behind him.

Five orange folding chairs sat in a row across the stage, each with a portrait of a bullied victim they represented, a small biography, and a pile of light blue bracelets that bear the words “I AM SOMEBODY,” the catchphrase of Stand for the Silent.

Smalley began the evening by saying he wasn’t a public speaker, just a construction worker who really cared about something. It was the sort of attitude Truman State University alumnus Jim Bergman wanted from Smalley when the Kirksville Rotary Club picked him for the event.

“It was very, very powerful,” Bergman said. “I was just absolutely inspired. I felt like we were bringing the right guy in, because we weren’t looking for another suit and tie, you know, we wanted a real person.”

Bergman is a member of the Kirksville Rotary Club and was awarded the Distinguished Service Award by Truman in 2012. The Rotary Club attends meetings on



Photo by Spencer Foust/TMN

Five folding chairs sit at the front of the stage, each with a photo representing one of the thousands of children lost to bullying each year. The bullying seminar was hosted by the Kirksville Rotary Club.

a state and nationwide level, and it was through one of these nationwide meetings that the Be A Buddy Not A Bully organization was formed.

The next morning, Jan. 20, Smalley gave the same presentation to the middle schoolers, followed by the high schoolers. Crowds of that size were sure to surpass Thursday night’s turnout, but that didn’t bother Bergman or Smalley.

“We didn’t know what to expect — we would have liked an entire lecture hall, but what we got was something we still really liked,” Bergman said. “Kirk even told us today, he said ‘don’t worry about the turnout.’ He said ‘I’d rather have 50 people that are intense and serious about taking this message throughout your community, than I would 500 people who just show up just to show up.’”

Bergman said he was also impressed with the presentation, even after having seen a similar dress rehearsal performance of it that morning. Smalley had done presentations in Schuyler County, Scotland County, Knox County and Monroe City already, making Kirksville another stop on his northeastern Missouri trek.

Bergman said his hope is that the high schoolers absorb the message of Smalley’s presentation the

most, because he thinks the older students have the greatest impact on younger ones’ behavior.

“Hopefully we can cascade this message from the high schoolers on down,” Bergman said. “It’s all about culture— if you can create a culture in the high school system where bullying is not tolerated, and [bullying] becomes the abnormal instead of the normal, then the kids in the lower levels will really resonate with that.”

Karla Dwyer, a Hy-Vee pharmacist and Rotary Club committee chair, was another member of the team present that night. In 2012, Dwyer met with Adair County Sheriff Robert Hardwick on behalf of the club, and Hardwick suggested bullying prevention as an idea for something the community could address. The Rotary Club piggybacked off the “Be A Buddy” program, and they’ve since held numerous anti-bullying events within the Kirksville area.

Dwyer said her favorite memory of the past five years of the “Be A Buddy” program came down to the one or two people each time that would tell her just how much this program has helped them.

For more information about Kirk Smalley’s group, Stand for the Silent, visit standforthesilent.org.

For more information about “Be A Buddy Not A Bully,” visit beabuddynotabully.org.

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Photo by Spencer Foust/TMN

Wristbands spread across shrines to the children who died as a result of bullying read, “I Am Somebody.” Audience members were encouraged to show support to children struggling with bullying by wearing the blue wristbands.

I AM SOMEBODY