

'Mr. Peace' Teaches Respect

South Lyon High grad returns to his roots to teach children importance of diversity

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Salem Elementary students interact with motivational speaker Kevin Szawala during an assembly.

Salem Elementary School students rocked the gymnasium Thursday with students singing hip hop songs about kindness and diversity lead by public speaker Kevin "Mr. Peace" Szawala.

The 2003 South Lyon High School graduate had the students stomping their feet and clapping uproariously during a presentation about being kind to one another. He's been taking his messages of empathy to schools throughout the district and around the country.

"We have to be able to look at what's inside of someone," Szawala said. He danced, sang and even shot a basketball to make his point.

He told a story about approaching a homeless man recently and spending three hours sitting down to talk to him and letting the man know that he cared. Szawala didn't encourage students to go up to strangers, but he did emphasize that there are many people the students encounter who want to be acknowledged, but are often forgotten just like the homeless man he met.

"There are so many people in the school hallways, bus stops and wherever you go who just want to be seen," said Szawala, a Novi resident. "It's up to us to do that. Your positive actions can help fix people who don't feel good about themselves. It doesn't have to be a complete stranger to show kindness. You can show kindness to people right here in your school."

He asked the students to close their eyes and point to themselves, "Sometimes the only thing someone wants to remember about you is your heart. You all have gifts. You all come in different shapes and sizes and we're all unique. Keep on looking at what's on the inside."

At the end of the assembly, fifth grade student Sophia Bolden said when you meet new people you have to remember, "They're just humans and you have to respect them for that."



Kevin Szawala, a 2003 South Lyon High School graduate, incorporated singing and dancing to his motivational message to the students at Salem Elementary last week. / Hal Gould | Staff Photographer

Hanna Szumski, also a fifth grade student, said, “If you meet someone new you should be kind even if you have butterflies in your stomach. It’s o.k., because they probably do, too.”

Fifth grade student Grace Stalions said, “you should be nice even if the other person is different.”

Szawala knew public speaking was something he wanted to do when he was in high school and since 2006 he has been taking his messages around the country at public and private schools, churches and universities tackling subjects like cyber bullying, self-worth, peer pressure and gang violence. His business name is Being Who I Want 2 Be, LLC.

“I’ve spoken to groups from age five to 95 about social justice,” Szawala said. “I’m trying to fill a void with something positive and healthy that they can have out there.”

Looking at the number of drug overdoses, drunk driving cases, suicides and violence, Szawala said, “the search for a solution to these ongoing issues has become very close to my heart and is why I feel so called to offer any support I can in this matter.

“We all need an outlet to express ourselves that gets us connected and doing something positive that makes us come alive,” Szawala said. “While the peer pressures to partake in the abusive habits will always be there, these outside influences to take negative actions toward ourselves or others becomes virtually non-existent when we are so focused on constructive projects and goals and are on fire for living.” He said he’s seen too many Facebook statuses that read, “I’m Bored” and there have been too many friends tell him they want something in their lives besides drinking and drugs. “It comes back to kindling an internal fire that gives us the sense of freedom and confidence needed to start each day with a purpose,” Szawala said. “It is the ‘Bowling Ball-Balloon’ example. You are either the ball — solid with strong character, grounded in sound principles and morals — or you are the balloon, empty, standing for nothing and waiting to follow the masses.”

At the end of the Salem presentation, principal Ray Metcalf told the students he hoped they had heard the message. “We want to make sure that when you walk away from here that you continue to be kind to one another,” he told the students.

For more information about Szawala go to www.mrpeace.org, or call **856-MRPEACE**.