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Kevin Szawala, a.k.a. Mr. Peace

One minute interview with 'Mr. Peace' Kevin Szawala

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By ALI ARMSTRONG

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Kevin Szawala (a.k.a. Mr. Peace) is a motivational speaker, rapper, youth minister, poet, hip-hop artist and peace activist. Through the use of hip-hop, humor and heart, he helps schools deal with the epidemic of bullying/ cyberbullying through his anti-bullying "Stop the Bull" assembly.

Along with being the founder of "Mr. Peace, Inc.", a 501(c)3 nonprofit motivational speaking foundation, Szawala is a member of the Catholic Speakers Organization, CMG Booking. So far, his message of hope has reached over one million young people nationwide.

Additionally, he is currently in charge of the middle/high school and young adult programs as the director of youth ministry at St. Mary's (Our Lady of the Snows) Parish in Milford.

The Spinal Column caught up with the Commerce Township resident to learn more.

You've been professionally speaking for nearly a decade now. Tell us more about how you got started in youth motivational speaking?

"What I share with some of the clubs that I speak to is that my evolution from corporate America started with a degree from U of M in economics with a minor in Spanish and global change. I got my MBA from Wayne State in entrepreneurial management and marketing. I had finished that and was climbing the ladder at a global auto supplier doing inside sales support, sales and marketing. I was good at it, but my heart wasn't in it. I had the drive, but it wasn't aligned with my purpose and calling. Now that they're both aligned, it's like on re. Every fiber of my being is alive. I wake up every day with that fire in my belly."

"The corporate job was becoming kind of toxic; it was cut-throat in general. Driving to work, my back was tensing up. People were having ulcers and getting hospitalized for depression, anxiety and heart attacks. They say most heart attacks happen Monday mornings at 9 a.m. and I believe that's because people are on their way to jobs that they just aren't in love with. That's what I was doing; working for the weekends and 'thank God it's Friday.' It was just constantly recurring with me and no amount of bonus or the raise that I kept getting fulfilled that. You can't put a price tag on passion. I made a leap of faith in 2010 to go after this full-time. It was the scariest thing in my life. I remember standing outside a restaurant in Ann Arbor with my friend and he keep repeating, 'This is going to be the hardest thing you've ever done.' I went to do it, and it was so hard. I left the comfort, I left the benefits, I left the job security. I didn't know if I was going to succeed, but I knew this is what I love doing, and when I'm doing it, it's not being what I want to be but who I want to be, and I found these career paths that have nurtured it."

"I struggled a bit financially at first, I wasn't where I am now. That's what led me to fall into youth ministry as the other hat that I wear... It's been a really good fit. I started at St. Mary's in July 2016, but I feel like the impact has been immediate."

You've been all across the country speaking and spreading your message of hope. Have you spoke at any schools locally?

"I've done Spring Mills a couple of times. I'm slated to do Johnson [Elementary] this year. There is a teacher there that really wants to bring my message to her students. I've done the high school; I was part of the Reaching Higher program for about five years, mentoring students through that leadership program. Locally, I've spoke at Glengary and Loon Lake elementaries. I'm slated to do Clifford Smart, Sarah Banks and Walnut Creek all in February. I did Geisler last November, and I spoke at Oak Valley and Country Oaks in September and March of last year."

"To keep making the imprint locally at schools has been a big part of not only building the trust among our current faith formation students that attend St. Mary religious education and making them more apt to join our middle school faith group and eventually our high school faith group. They both support each other. Having that foundation in the community, I'm able to spread the message more locally. But on the flipside, once I spread that I'm hopefully able to bring them back. Not necessarily to the pews of St. Mary, but to at least consider coming out to one of our YMCA nights where we hold all our meetings."

As of last year, you've spread your message to over one million youth spanning across 20 states. How does that feel?

"As of the end of 2017, I've spoken in 20 states to over one million youth in over 1,000 schools. That's been since 2006, so about the last decade. My goal is to do every state eventually. I'm just going where the message is needed. I'm not trying to do it for the fame, it's more that I want to get the message out and heard. I feel it's a healing message that's needed, and very timely with our country and a lot of the tension that's still present."

"I take that into my own ministry too, to reach the kids at the heart level. Whether it's our monthly middle school faith and fun nights, or bi-weekly high school program. What I'm trying to bring is that impact; the ah-ha moments where they can find their calling and their purpose, and wake up with the same fire to tell their story."

When speaking, what is the main message that you are trying to get through to students?

"That they're not alone. So many times we feel that we have to go it alone, and so many times we feel that there's all these opinions out there and every one of them matters, but the only opinion that matters is what they think of themselves. To push that they need to be themselves, everyone else is taken. To know that they're miracles. I talk about the 'M' in all of our hands. With the lines of our hands we all have a letter M in our palm. at M stands for miracle, but so many youths don't believe that. There's so much non-love and self-hatred out there."

What role does personal experience play in your speaking?

"A lot of it stems back to this past decade. I had a series of deaths in my life. I had a best friend die in a drunk driving incident. A month later, one of my youth group members died of a heroin overdose. A week later, another friend died of an overdose. I started becoming numb. I had gone to these funerals, four in a row, followed by two relatives passing, and a grandmother and grandfather passing...Shortly later, I was inside my apartment with my cousin and two guys in hoods came through and told us to empty our pockets, pistols cocked at our stomachs. Everything flashed before my eyes and you start to appreciate certain things more. Weeks to follow, I hated the people that did that to us, I hated the loss, I hated the death. I stopped caring how I treated people. I shut down; I became numb. Something hit me, and I said the best way I can honor their legacy is how I choose to live today. It was just more fuel for what I'm doing, more inspiration. I know why I have to get up every morning."

Outside of speaking, you've produced six rap albums. Each mixtape has a faith-based undertone with uplifting, positive lyrics. Tell me more about how you first started rapping.

"It kind of started when I was younger with Weird Al Yankovic and him doing his own parodies. I started writing my own. It was just funny things at first, but those turned more into poems; poems with substance and purpose behind it. Then the poems turned into freestyle to different beats and instrumentals. I had started putting these poems I had written to beats, or raps. I started chopping them up and learning about breath and technique, and how to record, and so ware, and mixing and mastering. It's just been a passion, and a really good tool to relate to the youth, whether it's through my youth ministry or through the assemblies that I do. With that, I can take the message deeper."

Mr. Peace Inc. received 501(c)3 status last year. Can you tell us more?

"Back to July, I am officially a 501(c)3 nonprofit, private foundation and Mr. Peace Inc. e whole premise of the nonprofit is to offer motivational assembly programs, primarily for K-12 public and private schools, but universities, boy scouts clubs, youth groups,

retreats and conferences. The other part of the equation that will really start to pick up is to hopefully secure some funding through different foundations that are kind of aligned with my mission of helping youth in pain and at-risk youth."

"Every dollar that I'm bringing in is going to go towards schools with limited to no funding when it comes to assembly programs. I have a list already of spots that would definitely like my services but don't have anything to offer."

For more information, visit www.mrpeace.org.

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MR. PEACE

ST. MARY

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