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Local teachers already impacted by Sanders' message

By DAVID BURCHAM
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Bill Sanders gets paid to talk. But it's members of his audience who receive the gems.

A noted author and host of a nationally syndicated television show for teens, Sanders is equally adept and comfortable in connecting with students as well as their parents.

He returns to New Castle for the third time this year at 7 p.m. Wednesday at the George Washington Intermediate School auditorium. The program is intended for adults, but it's open to the public.

If you're going ... Time, date, costs

According to teachers, Sanders has already made an impact in the city schools.

A speaker with the National Character Education Foundation, the Michigan resident was in town Jan. 2 for a presentation to educators during an in-service day. At the administration's request, he came back last month to speak to junior high and high school students.

"One of the most powerful things he said was that sometimes a kind word to a student can make their day and change their whole aspect on education," said Angela Joseph, a reading facilitator in the New Castle elementary schools.

Joseph, who has been in the system for 32 years, said she agreed with Sanders' philosophy and his words only emboldened her approach.

"His presentation was excellent" Joseph said. "It reminded me to go the extra mile for children who may be struggling because of family situations or their capabilities."

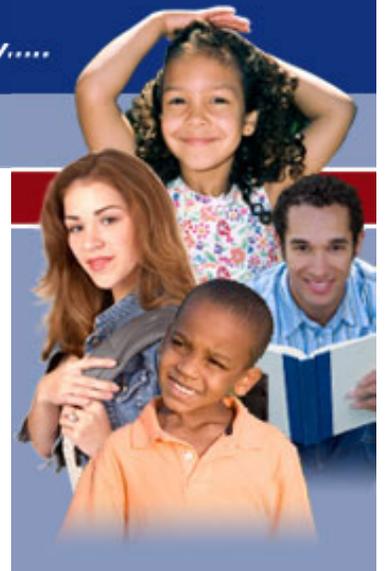
Joseph said others have been touched by what they heard from Sanders. She said his name and suggestions have come up in planning meetings and during informal discussions.

FAVORABLE RESPONSE

"Our teachers were very responsive and impressed with the program," said Terence Meehan, administrative assistant to the superintendent of the New Castle Area School District. "And the reaction from students was overwhelmingly favorable."

Meehan noted some students stayed after Sanders' program last month to speak one-on-one with him.

Sanders, who calculates he has stood in front of 5 million people in 30 years of public speaking, said he has received mail from more than a dozen New Castle students since his appearance here. He said some have corresponded more than once.



"They know that I care about them," said Sanders, who makes sure that people know how to contact him.

More than 15,000 letters — mail and e-mail — from students across the country have arrived at his home. He takes time to answer them.

His words have literally saved lives. Eight teens told him they were planning to commit suicide before they heard his take on things. One had planned to kill himself on the very day Sanders came to his school to speak. The boy said he changed his mind while listening.

POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

Ralph Blundo, a social studies teacher at the high school, said the timing of Sanders' program for the teachers was almost as important as his message.

"His words were profound, but the fact that it was the beginning of a new year made it even better. It felt like starting anew."

Blundo, 34, who is in his eighth year of teaching, said the program was a positive reinforcement for him.

"Teaching can be frustrating when you expect a lot from your students. Our kids have issues, as kids in all schools do, and we can't forget that."

Blundo said sometimes it takes a voice from outside the community to reach students even if they've heard the same messages from people they know.

Meehan pointed out that Sanders' appearance was booked several weeks ago and not as a reaction to the recent drug-related death of a student during school.

"We want to be proactive and not reactive in dealing with students," said Meehan, who hopes character development education can become part of the school curriculum.

He said there is a large burden on teachers, who must be all things to all students.

"Teachers know their subjects, but they need tools to reach the kids," Meehan said.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

Much of Sanders' message is about taking responsibility and challenging yourself to do the right thing no matter what the circumstances. A man of faith, Sanders uses personal experiences to relate to his audience.

Although he's a 55-year-old grandfather, Sanders says he hasn't forgotten what it was like to be young and the many pressures that go with it.

Sanders candidly admits that he had a problem with anger that nearly drove a defiant son away.

"A week into my son's senior year in high school, I told him he needed to find another place to live."

So the teen left — as did his twin sister in support of her brother.

"I needed those kids in my life so I called my son and admitted that I had a problem with anger and that I need to get it fixed."

The kids came back.

He said acknowledging mistakes is crucial in building and maintaining relationships.

"You must learn how to say, 'I'm sorry, forgive me, I'll try to do better.' "

Sanders said he believes that right is right, even if nobody does it; and wrong is wrong even if everybody does it.



DIDN'T COME EASY

Ironically, Sanders struggled with his public speaking skills in his college years. He dropped out of his Dale Carnegie public speaking course twice as a college student before being encouraged by a professor to take it again. The third time was the charm.

"He believed in me more than I did," Sanders said of Don Davies.

"I guess I had a fear of success."

His career began as a motivational speaker for companies until one day in his hometown of Portage, Mich., the middle school principal called to ask if he could rush over to replace a speaker who had failed to show for an assembly.

"I told him that speaking to kids wasn't my thing," recalled Sanders, who came anyway.

"I got in front of them and still didn't have a clue what to say," he recalled. "But then it was just magic."

Now he believes elementary and middle school students are his best audience.

"They're easier to reach because they're more open to your ideas and, as a speaker, you still have some authority with them."

In three decades, he has shared a platform with Paul Harvey, Art Linkletter, Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, Terry Bradshaw, Chuck Swindoll, Zig Ziglar, Josh McDowell, and Presidents Ford and Reagan.

Despite pouring himself into others, he never feels empty.

"My message is never the same. I watch people's eyes and I can tell when I've touched a nerve ... and then I go there."

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