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Oakdale Team Takes Class in Manhood



ROGERS -- Respect is the playbook for the weekly lunch meetings eighth-graders on the Oakdale Middle School football team had this year.

"Who cares how you look? Can you play?" Ray Keller, football coach, asked the group.

It's a lesson they've heard before as a team. Eye black won't make them a team, won't change the way they play, they answer.

"When you're in the game of life, it's not how you look, it's what you can get done in life," Keller said.

Who they will be in life was the last in a series of lessons from the "REAL Man" program Keller taught them this year. The four quarters of the program are "Respect all people, Especially

women; Always do the right thing; and Live a life that matters."

Teens need lessons in character, and Keller said he believes those lessons are part of his job.

The program has had a positive difference at Oakdale, said David Smith, assistant principal.

Student groups -- such as a football team -- are often told they're special and they represent the school, but there's no instruction manual that comes with that responsibility.

"We have to teach them how to handle that," Smith said.

Middle school is a good time to talk about the social and physical changes boys go through, said Jeff Smith, Oakdale assistant football coach.

"They're going to make choices that lead to habits that stick with them their entire life," he said.

Teachers hold student leaders to higher expectations, David Smith said. However, as emissaries, they may expect special privileges, which at Oakdale was some pregame swagger as they looked for celebrity status in the lunch line.

The lunch line egos are gone, and teens said they learned how to better treat their classmates.

Dalton Easley, an eighth-grader, said he's learned to watch what he says and who he says it to. He used to think he had to cut up to get attention.

"I was in trouble constantly. I learned what respect can give," Dalton said.

Student Giovanni Arizmendi said he now opens doors for women.

Juan Tapia, another eighth-grader, said he too learned how to treat women. Having a program that teaches respect for women might reduce abuse, he said.

Levi Bootwala said he learned more respect for his mom.

"I don't usually mouth off to her like I used to do," he said.

The program helped him, said Melvin Rivera, an eighth-grader. He's trying to be a man and tells bullies to stop or ignores their taunts. He used to get in trouble on the bus. One bus ride, a girl slapped him. His first thought was to hit back.

That's when the lesson kicked in and he stopped. The coach applauded him for his actions later, Melvin said.

That is what the program is all about, said Kathy DiCocco, an executive director of the Helping Other People Excel Foundation For a Better Tomorrow. Her late son, football coach Frank DiCocco, wrote the program while working as a coach.

Some of his students had no family, no fathers, no home life, she said. Many of them looked to their coach for life lessons, and he began writing the program in 2009.

Frank DiCocco died of an extended illness in 2013, but not before he'd shipped some 6,000 manuals around the country. His mother has mailed 10,000 more. It's hard to gauge the size of the program because so many programs have been emailed to coaches, Kathy DiCocco said.

Keller heard of the program in an email from Frank DiCocco in 2013. The enthusiasm drew him in, Keller said. DiCocco talked about genuine manhood that produces a respectful, respectable and responsible young man.

"This is something I felt that most young men today really need to hear," Frank DiCocco wrote.

"Every kid needs to be taught how to respect, to be responsible and to live a life that matters," Kathy DiCocco said.