



ORANGEVILLE BANNER

GRAND VALLEY COLUMN with Jim Shaw

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Changing lives one speech at a time

When I first met Robert Pio Hajjar, I was blown away with his enthusiasm. The first thing he did after shaking my hand was to give me his business card.

I had been told he was going to address the students at Grand Valley Public School and he was amazing. I like amazing, so I went to hear him.

Before he got up to the microphone to speak, he cued the music operator and got all the kids up to dance. Four hundred kids and their teachers were jumping, clapping and dancing. I thought, "This is great!" and joined in, despite my arthritis. Robert did a phantom guitar run across the front. There was fun in the air.

Robert finally got up to speak. His first words were, "Are you having fun yet? ... Fun is my middle name."

He told the kids that each of them were important and they each could be a leader. He talked about bullying and the fact that no one respects a bully. He said that they must have a vision. He asked them to think how they could make a contribution.

He finished with a couple of very inspiring phrases: The cards that were dealt to me in life are not as important as how I play them. I love life! What would those doctors say about me now?

You see, Robert was born 33 years ago with the condition known as Down Syndrome.

Born in 1977, doctors informed his parents, "He will be profoundly retarded. Put him away and forget about him. Have another child."

The doctors did not realize Robert was born to be a champion. Blessed with natural showmanship, and a very supportive family, this charismatic, motivational speaker is making a difference in the world. Travelling widely, all across North America, he is living proof of what is possible when you include people like him, give them love, encouragement and opportunity.

Robert's remarkable life story includes high school graduation, eight years as a Children's Aid Society volunteer, a participant in golf, hockey, baseball and a Special Olympics record-holder in the 25M freestyle and founder of IDEAL WAY, a charity to help persons like him.

He came to aunt Addie Daabous, who was working in marketing and said he had some money in a box and he wanted to start a company that would help people like him who lived in group homes. She counted the money for him and it came to \$62.05. She believed she should help her nephew so she gave up her job to help him start his company. So far, Robert has donated more than \$335,000 worth of merchandise to those he supports.

Robert has received recognition for his efforts, such as the City of Toronto Unsung Hero Award. But the most important thing he does, in my opinion, is to help us realize everyone is important, even if we are all different.

A girl in a school he was addressing came up after the presentation and said, "When Robert came in, I laughed at him. Then, he opened his mouth and changed my life!" That says it all.