

News Local

Look past disability to ability, speaker tells London youth

By [Chris Montanini](#), Londoner

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Robert Pio Hajjar shares a laugh with members of Mountsfield elementary school's social justice club after speaking to pupils at the school about living with Down syndrome.

Public school packed into their gymnasium and cheered on Robert Pio Hajjar as he danced a little jig before taking the podium Oct. 14.

The school's social justice committee invited Pio Hajjar, founding director of the charity IDEAL-WAY, to speak to students, from junior kindergarten to grade 8, about living with Down syndrome.

And the dance - which oozed with Pio Hajjar's playful charisma and had students clapping along to the music - was very much by design.

"I'm a lean, mean dancing machine," he said afterwards.

Ellen DeGeneres is one of his main inspirations.

But dancing aside, it was Pio Hajjar's message of optimism despite the obstacles he's faced in his life that he really wanted to share with the young audience.

"I was only two years old when the doctors told my parents to put me away and forget me," he said.

Pio Hajjar, 30 years later and living in London, has founded his own charity with a little help from his family, been a special Olympian and was awarded the 2010 self advocate of the year award from the Canadian Down Syndrome Society, to name a few of his accomplishments.

"Yes, I was born with Down syndrome, but I feel great about it," he said. "Yes, I have a disability, but I ask you to see my ability."

Pio Hajjar's charity also helps raise funds for those with intellectual disabilities who are living in group homes, hosting give-aways where they can shop for clothing and other necessities for free.

The organization's next event will be in London Nov. 6.

"Robert recognizes he's fortunate," said Addie Daabous, executive director of IDEAL-WAY and Pio Hajjar's aunt. "So (he) came up with this concept."

Pio Hajjar's message of inclusion wasn't lost on the social justice committee at Mountsfield.

"I've learned today there's nothing we can do that he can't," said Amani Haskouri, one of the committee's members. "We thought it was a different thing to do and it was pretty fun. He's very energetic."

The committee, now in its second year at Mountsfield, volunteers to help people locally and worldwide, added Haskouri, 12, who mentioned supporting a project last year to help build a school in Sierra Leone, Africa.

"Knowing that I can make an impact, it's pretty awesome, it's a good feeling."

When they learned about Pio Hajjar's speech, the committee was "totally energetic about it."

"He was very inspirational, he's going to make me look out and think of the world with a more positive attitude," said 13-year-old Eva Bosnjak, another committee member.

"I think just hearing something from a regular person, from their perspective, is one thing - but hearing from a person that's actually experienced it is another thing."

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