

Sharing joy with the world, one “Bot” at a time

By Helen Schmidling Correspondent

“Imagine if you could go through your entire day followed by a giant invisible robot that protects you, defends you, and gives you outrageous compliments.” – Gary Hirsch



When Gary Hirsch was a little boy, he suffered from horrible, monster-infested nightmares – dreams so vivid they sent him knocking on his parents’ bedroom door for comfort. The monsters, he said, threatened to take him away.

His father, a gentle man, took young Gary to the kitchen, made him some cinnamon toast, handed Gary some paper and pencils and asked him to draw his monsters. Then, together, they named the monsters. Gary’s dad then explained that he could just as easily get rid of the monsters, simply by turning the pencil over and erasing them. “Eventually, I just felt better,” he said. The nightmares abated, Gary grew up, and he continued drawing his unique characters.

These days, Gary Hirsch disseminates joy to a world beset with negativity and bullying, one tiny character, or “Bot” at a time. What’s a Bot? Stay tuned.

Sponsored by Sisters Folk Festival and Sisters School District, Hirsch visited our schools last week to work with art teachers and kids in elementary, middle and high school. In a matter of a few minutes, he took classes from quiet, slightly bored, and morose to calm, communicative, and creative.

A Bot is a tiny figure, painted like a robot, on the reverse side of a domino. Hirsch calls them Joybots. The tile is smooth, tactile, feels good. Joybots deliver a message that you are not alone, you have strength, and you are loved. In the past 10 years, Hirsch has created more than 50,000 Bots and at least that many have been made and shared by others.

Last week, hundreds of kids and adults in Sisters

made bunches of Bots under Hirsch’s gentle and often humorous guidance. The tiny Bots are meant to be shared or to be kept at hand as a reminder of love, inspiration, and curiosity.

Hirsch began the Bot parade Thursday morning with third- and fourth-graders at Sisters Elementary School. That afternoon, at Sisters Middle School, Hirsch visited the seventh- and eighth-grade art class members. He asked why they were in art class. “Because they like art ... because there was no theater ... because the last school they were in didn’t offer art ... and because they like the teacher” were just some of their answers.

They made more Bots, as did the fifth- and sixth-graders who followed. Each kid made at least two Bots: “one to share and one to keep for moments when you need your own,” Hirsch said. Some Bot-makers were not sure who they’d share the Bot with, but others said “my best friend ... my Mom ... my neighbor who fell out of a tree.”

Friday, at Sisters High School, Hirsch led his single largest group ever at one time making Bots. Four hundred high school students got busy with dominos and felt pens and made Joybots in the auditorium. Imagine that! On Saturday, Hirsch presented his TEDx talk to the public in the Sisters Middle School commons, and a huge Bot-painting session followed.

The Bot creators were encouraged to label the side of each Bot with their name and #botjoy, and share it with someone intentionally, or leave it around for others to discover. If and when a Bot is found, take your photograph with it, and use #botjoy to post to your favorite social media

platform. Then share it with someone or hide it for another to discover.

The event was accomplished with the help and enthusiasm of art teachers Judy Fuentes, Karen Williams, and Bethany Gunnarson, and many volunteers and staff from Sisters Folk Festival. The artist’s residency is the culmination of a five-year Studio to Schools grant, administered by SFF.

It’s also tied into the upcoming annual My Own Two Hands event, which has as its theme, “We All Belong,” said Brad Tisdell, artistic director of the festival. Furthermore, Bots tie into the school district’s promotion of social/emotional health and wellbeing in the school and in the Sisters community. Hirsch and several student and faculty helpers painted a huge mural at the Middle School, featuring giant Bots and a thought-provoking question, “Who helps you belong?”

Art has been a prompt that’s helped Hirsch to fulfill his life mission to help others – both kids and adults. “I wake up every day thinking about how art can help, and

the Bots have been my vehicle for doing this in delightful and surprising ways,” he says.

Hirsch has taken his affirmative message around the world and around the country. His TEDx talk is posted on his website (www.botjoy.com). So popular has the concept become that he even has a link on the site called “Steal this Idea.” That’s how he enables others to share.

“I like to have a conversation with my audience,” Hirsch said. On Saturday, he asked the audience “How do you help people in your life?” One kid answered, “I let my cat in and out when she needs to,” and an adult said,

“I mentor a kid.” Many pondered the question in silence. A while back, he made a thousand Bots for a children’s hospital in Portland, to help young ones be strong when they’re feeling pain.

Making Bots and murals is only part of Hirsch’s presentation service. When not working with schools, hospitals, and nonprofits, he uses improvisational theater (better known as improv) as a teaching tool for businesses including Nike, Intel, Disney, Apple, and many more, through his Portland-based consultancy called On Your Feet.

For more information, check out www.botjoy.com.



PHOTO BY HELEN SCHMIDLING

Gary Hirsch guided Sisters students in making Joybots last week.

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