

Vernonia Students Break Down the Walls

Workshop with Phil Boyte highlights Unity Week

Vernonia High School students were offered an opportunity to examine how they relate to their classmates during the week of April 17-20 when guest speaker Phil Boyte presented his workshop, "Breaking Down the Walls."

Boyte trained about 30 students identified as campus leaders, who helped with the delivery of his program and acted as group leaders during learning exercises.

Boyte, who helps schools create a positive campus culture through his dynamic and encouraging presentations, came to the attention of some Vernonia students when he was a presenter at the Oregon Association of Student Councils (OSAC) leadership conference this past fall in Seaside. "He spoke about how we can reach out to kids who may not feel like they are included, or who may be having personal issues like depression

or anxiety, and how we as students can connect with them and let them know that we see them as a person, that they are not invisible, and that they are part of the school," said VHS senior Meagan Ely. Ely helped organize and coordinate Boyte's Vernonia visit, along with fellow senior Cassidy Whitton, as part of their Project Based Learning class. The project also involved students from the school Leadership class.

The Project Based Learning Class is taught by Jim Krahn and offers students the opportunity to learn by investigating real world issues and finding solutions through the development of a group project.

"We have very little cultural diversity in our school and community," explains Ely. "Yes, we have our foreign exchange students, but we tend to have a very white population in our school.

Students that are different are bullied and we wanted to do something to make our school a better place for everyone –

kids thought this was going to be a waste of time and that it wouldn't make any difference," said Ely.

Instead, Ely says, students were actively involved in the exercises and engaged with each other in ways they had never experienced before. A particularly powerful exercise, "Cross the Line" had students and faculty honestly answer difficult questions, like "Who has experienced depression?" and "Who has been arrested?" by stepping across a line and being recognized by the entire high school for their struggles. The exercise gave students an opportunity

to learn things about others they did not know and see who else they may share experiences with. "Everyone took it really seriously and we learned all kinds of really deep things about each other," said Ely.

One student, who is known as very shy and reserved, stood up and addressed the entire school during the final assembly, and talked about how students could make the school a better place for them.

Another student, who was not previously involved in school sports because they didn't know anyone and was too intimidated to try because they were afraid of failure, was invited to start lifting weights and join a team. "It was kind of a turning point for them, because now they have friends doing the same things," said Ely.

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Photo by Alyssa Mcneme

especially for the kids that might not feel like they are included."

Students devised the idea of Unity Week as a way to build relationships throughout the school. Students were assigned working groups, which were hand selected to include students that did not usually interact with each other. "The groups were hard to work in because we didn't know each other - they weren't our friends," said Ely. "We spent all week working with our groups trying to find ways to get everyone to open up to the experience."

Ely says the Project Based Learning Class had to fundraise in order to have Boyte take part in their program. Boyte trained student group leaders on Wednesday, April 19 and then worked with the entire school during the day on April 20.

"Before the program a lot of



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May 25, 2017 6:30 PM

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