



Sherlyn Dendy's 'Lady Portrait on Yellow' was part of the Look Me in the Eye art show



Vicki Anderson

## Creating a Vulnerable Community

A large part of the Look Me in the Eye campaign has been getting the message out to students. Kaasa has been presenting in front of school assemblies since before the campaign started. He usually speaks with another disability activist, accompanied by former KEZI news anchor Rick Dancer, whose brother-in-law is a client of OSLP.

Dancer helps facilitate a conversation between Kaasa and the students. The activists share their stories of living with a disability and how it feels to be marginalized by others, which is followed by a freewheeling Q&A session. The presentation is built on radical honesty. The students can open up and ask questions they'd be afraid to ask otherwise.

Kaasa does about six presentations a year, but would like to do more.

One of the goals of these presentations is obvious: to educate students about what it's like to live with a disability. A few years ago, when Kaasa spoke in front of Debbie Roberts-Sorg's students at Laurel Elementary School in Junction City, he activated his wheelchair seat-elevator. "Nick raises up in his wheelchair and they became instantly quiet," Roberts-Sorg says. "You could hear a pin drop with 250 kids in the auditorium."

She says the presentation changed her students, making them more open to people who are different than them. They learned, she says, that "these are people. They aren't something else."

Kaasa also remembers what it was like to be a student at Sheldon High School, and he says his personal goal is to show that students with disabilities have a voice. He has presented for the students of his old special education teacher, Edane Chism, communicating how to use the concept of Look Me in the Eye to self-advocate.

But the Look Me in the Eye message also has pleasant unintended consequences for the greater student body. "You think you will teach them to see students with dis-

abilities," Kaasa says, "but it's basically helping the school see the rest of their classmates. It turns into this whole giant movement of 'people are people and they need to be treated as such.'"

Dancer says that something powerful happens when people with disabilities share their stories: It creates a community of vulnerable people. Once, he says, when they were presenting at Kelly Middle School for more than 600 kids, a boy grabbed the mic and said people picked on him, calling him a "fag." The boy asked his school: "Can we please stop this?"

Kids then passed around the mic, admitting to being picked on for being too smart, too little, too fat, too stupid. "They found a way through our community of disability to talk to each other," Dancer says. "When you bring in someone with a disability, they are vulnerable, and the kids are allowed to be vulnerable and not afraid. It's one of the most powerful things you'll ever see. This community of disability brings out these hidden stories."

Phacelia Cramer, now a sophomore at Williams College in Massachusetts, started a Look Me in the Eye club at South Eugene High School to facilitate social interactions between mainstream and special education students. Cramer, whose younger sister has an intellectual disability, noticed how students in special education classrooms were isolated. She started a once-a-week lunch group based on the campaign's ideas.

"You could see how it visibly changed [students'] attitudes about coming to school," Cramer says, with special education students high-fiving mainstream students in the hallways. The club has since spread to Sheldon High School, where her sister is a student.

## Empowering Self-Advocates

Ultimately, the lasting effect of the Look Me in the Eye campaign may be in helping people with disabilities become self-advocates. In late August, I attended the organization's advisory board meeting, where Kaasa and other activists associated with OSLP and Full Access meet to

discuss the events they had planned for September, which included a "Honk if you like 'Look Me in the Eye'" campaign Sept 21. Activists clustered on well-trafficked street corners around Eugene and Springfield with signs to raise awareness.

"Just be rowdy," Dubie says. "The corner that gets the most honks wins."

September was a big month that also included a "Look Me in the Eye" art show at the now closed Alexi Era Gallery and a presentation to state representatives and Eugene mayor-elect Lucy Vinis. Local television stations also aired a new Look Me in the Eye television commercial.

Dancer, who owns a media production company, was there with his cameraman getting all the angles. He recorded the activists as they sat in chairs and wheelchairs, coloring signs that say things such as "Honk for Respect." Dancer asked them what Look Me in the Eye means to them with their responses to be edited later into segments and sound bites.

Lisa Sansevere was at the meeting here with her husband, George Floyd, both of whom have an intellectual disability. Wearing her Look Me in the Eye T-shirt, she says into the camera: "We should be treated with respect and dignity," adding that having a disability doesn't mean you can't do something. "We can, we will, watch us. We are not mistakes around here. I am part of something and I belong."

Another activist, Vicki Anderson, who has spina bifida and schizophrenia, and uses a wheelchair, faces the camera. She wears large glasses and a floppy straw hat, half-covering two long purple braids. Later, when I interview her, she calls herself "the rowdy one" and says the Look Me in the Eye campaign is empowering. Anderson used to be ashamed of her disability, she says, but now just wants to change people's attitudes and how they act towards her.

With the camera on her, she says that the campaign means "standing up for what we want, saying things from our point of view, and not being made fun of." She grimaces and peers into the camera.

Anderson means business. She's looking at you, Eugene. She says, "Look me in the eye."

People interested in getting involved can go to [lookmeintheeye.org](http://lookmeintheeye.org) for more information. ■