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Kindhearted Columbine girl 'challenges' Batavia youth

By *Dan Crofts*

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The place was Batavia High School's auditorium; the time, 8:15 a.m.; the date, Wednesday, March 3. The place filled up with the slowly increasing bustle of a high school assembly as students poured in from their home-rooms.

Outside the auditorium was a large banner with the words "I Accept Rachel's Challenge" written on the top. It was blank, except for just a few student signatures.

Fast forward about an hour -- the morning assembly was over; many of the students were moved to tears, and the speaker got a standing ovation...much to the amazement of BHS Principal Christopher Dailey.

"I don't remember anyone ever getting a standing ovation except the basketball coach right before he headed off to the state finals," Dailey said.

As for the banner...



by 6:30 p.m.

it looked like this:

LEFT



RIGHT



CENTER



So what happened? Who or what was it that got these teens so moved, motivated, and pumped up?



The "who" was Derek Kilgore, a representative of the internationally acclaimed project, "Rachel's Challenge."

Rachel's Challenge was founded by Darrell and Sandy Scott in honor of their daughter, Rachel Joy Scott, the first victim of the Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, Colo., on April 20, 1999. Derek is a close personal friend of Rachel's family -- especially her father and her brother, Craig.

Rachel's friends and family members remember her as a very kind, carefree, compassionate and thoughtful person. Not long before she died, she wrote an essay called "My Ethics, My Codes of Life," in which she shared her outlook on life.

"I have this theory," Rachel wrote, "that if one person can go out of their way to show compassion, then it will start a chain reaction of the same. People will never know how far a little kindness can go."

During the last few years of her life, Rachel had some startling premonitions and was convinced of two things: that she would die at a young age, and that her life would somehow change the world.

After her death, Rachel's father dedicated himself to making sure that would happen. Since then, her story has impacted millions of people around the world.

Kilgore is one of many speakers personally trained by Darrell Scott to deliver Rachel's message to schools all around the country. Derek also gave a presentation at Batavia Middle School at 1:30 p.m., as well as a presentation for parents and community leaders

at 6:30 p.m. at BHS.



Kilgore talks with BMS Principal Sandra Griffin about his work with Rachel's Challenge, which brings him to more than 90 schools per year.

But Kilgore did not start things off the way his audience might have expected; instead of launching into the details of Columbine and Rachel's life, he made things personal for his listeners right away.

"How many of you have lost someone close to you?" he asked.

Almost everyone raised his/her hand.

"This assembly is dedicated to Rachel, of course," Kilgore continued, "but also to the people you've all cared about and lost."

With video footage, anecdotes and motivational speaking, Kilgore told students about Rachel's kindness toward others by drawing attention to specific examples, such as the time she intervened when a special-needs student named Adam was being bullied in the hallway.

"Rachel didn't just talk about making a positive difference in the world," he said. "She actually did things to help the people around her."

In Adam's case, Rachel's action made the difference between life and death.

"Adam was contemplating suicide," Kilgore said. "He knew exactly when, where and how

he was going to take his own life. But after Rachel helped him, he changed his mind because this proved to him that there was someone who cared whether he lived or died."

To further illustrate the importance of individual actions and attitudes, Kilgore contrasted Rachel's with those of the Columbine shooters. Here are some examples:

One of the greatest influences in the lives of the Columbine shooters was Adolf Hitler; one of the greatest influences in Rachel's life was Anne Frank.

The Columbine shooters were racists, and one of their victims was a black student who they taunted with racial slurs before killing; Rachel, for her part, always tried to look for the best in everyone and avoid prejudice -- aka pre-judging someone based on how they look or act.

With anecdotes from the Scott family and others, some jokes and more video footage, Kilgore taught the BHS community all about Rachel's many acts of kindness and the attention her cause has gained around the world, including the recognition of Presidents Clinton and Bush as well as many celebrities.

The "challenge" to students was to follow Rachel's example in actively making a positive difference in their schools and communities (Kilgore made it clear that this was not because Rachel was "perfect," but because she had definite goals for her everyday life and never gave up on them).

So that's the gist of Rachel's Challenge. But more concretely, what exactly is the *challenge* students are to meet in their daily lives?

There are actually five challenges:

Look for the best in others

Again, Rachel always tried to do this. Kilgore said that we can always see the best or the worst in people depending on what we want to see.

Dare to dream

Rachel always talked about being famous and sensed that she would have a huge impact on the world. At age thirteen, she outlined her hands on her bedroom wall and, inside of the outline, wrote: "These hands belong to Rachel Joy Scott and will someday touch millions of people's hearts."

"She believed that even one small act of kindness could affect someone so deeply that they'll want to do it for someone else," Kilgore said, "and that this would start a ripple effect that would go around the world."

Kilgore concluded this section of the presentation by mentioning a recent Harvard study indicating that people who dream big end up being more successful and doing more to change the world.

Input determines output

Kilgore encouraged his listeners to pay attention to who and what their influences are, reminding them that the Columbine killers' minds were filled with negative influences.

After the Columbine tragedy, Craig Scott understood in a painful way the impact of the media on people's thoughts and actions. So he decided to become a film producer and to make movies and TV shows that inspire people and encourage positive thoughts and actions. He is now working on a feature film about his sister, which will be released in the next few years (Kilgore commented that this, in a way, makes Rachel's childhood dream of becoming a "famous actress" come true even after her death).

Little acts of kindness

One of the lessons to be learned from Rachel's Challenge is that the smallest acts of kindness can mean a lot, even if they seem insignificant.

Kilgore told the story of Rachel's outreach to Amber, a young girl who started attending Columbine High School after her mother was killed in a car accident. She was new to the school, and no one spoke to her or even looked her in the eye all day. Then, as she was sitting by herself at lunch, Rachel came over out of the blue and asked if she would like to sit with her and her friends.

"Amber later said that this had a huge impact on her," Kilgore said, "not because the act itself was so huge, but because she was going through a rough time and someone reached out to her and let her know that she cared."

Start your own chain reaction

Kilgore did not come to preach to anyone; he came to help inspire, encourage, and challenge people to want to make a difference and to start their own chain reactions.

One of the tools he left them with was F.O.R. (Friends of Rachel), a new club for interested students dedicated to specific ways of fostering an "atmosphere of kindness" in their school and community. The assembly was followed by an optional meeting for any students who wanted to share their feelings about the morning presentation and learn about how they can get involved in the project.

More than one-third of the student population showed up. Kilgore was very impressed with the BHS community's response to Rachel's Challenge.

"I go to a ton of schools every year, and this is definitely one of those schools where I see a lot of potential."

As the morning assembly came to a close, he made things personal again. He asked everyone to close their eyes and think of the people closest to them.

"In the next few days, go up to them and tell them how you feel. Let them know how much they mean to you and how much you appreciate them."

In closing, here are some comments from students on how Rachel's Challenge affected them personally:

"What most affected me was when they showed what her dad wrote on her coffin," one girl said, tearfully. "It showed how much love he had for her, and it reminded me of my own dad."

Here is what Rachel's dad wrote: *"Your life was so full and meaningful and your death will not be in vain. I love you so much -- my sweet Rachel."*

"This presentation really impacted me, because my friend killed herself," another girl said. "What Rachel wrote, I believe in. I want to take Rachel's Challenge."

After these two students spoke at the gathering after the assembly, about a dozen more starting coming up to the stage. Others followed, sometimes several at a time, to share their thoughts and feelings:

"I was touched by Rachel's poetry. I actually write poetry, but I've always been too afraid to share it with anybody. But I think I might do it now."

"This whole presentation made me cry," one of the male students said. "I want to make a difference in the world showing kindness."

"I'm one of those people who shuts everybody out because I'm afraid to show my feelings. This made me want to change that."

"I'm one of those people who's judged people because of how they look and act. Sometimes I do it just to be funny. And I just want to say that if I've ever done or said anything to hurt anyone, I am so sorry. The truth is I love everybody in this school and I would give my life for any one of you."

After hearing all the students speak, Kilgore had this to say:

"It's a really big thing to come up on stage and say all those things and express these kinds of feelings in front of your peers. Now it's time to put those feelings into action."

ADDITIONAL NOTES

At the BMS assembly, Kilgore offered the students similar but more age-appropriate goals:

Treat others the way you want to be treated

Dream big

Appreciate everyone, mock no one

The power of positive gossip

Forgive and be forgiven

"This is one of the best assemblies we've had," said Lucille DiSanto, one of the BMS teachers who was passing out tissues to some tearful students. "He really got their attention."



One of the parents who attended the evening session had this to say:

"It was great. It gives us something we can take beyond the classrooms and into the business world."

For more information about this project and to ask a speaker to come to your school, visit the [Rachel's Challenge](#) ^[1] website.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.rachelschallenge.org>