

School program inspired by Columbine tragedy

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Bailey Duff and Olivia Eiler weren't even 2 years old when 12 students and one teacher were killed at Columbine High School in 1999.

But they are two of 100 students who are working to make a difference at Hazelwood Middle School in a program named after the first victim, called Rachel's Challenge.

The national program's goal is to start a chain reaction of kindness and to create a permanent positive culture change in schools and communities everywhere.

"We're doing it, because of the Columbine shooting and we want people to understand how people feel when they are left out and how Rachel [Scott] made people feel welcome," said Duff.

"I think there are some kids here who might be led to do something like that and this will help them," Eiler said. "I don't think anyone is going to get shot, but just get into fights."

Keith Nance, who teaches sixth grade, is one of seven people who went to a conference in Indianapolis in November and learned about the program.

"It was a life changing event for me personally and also as a teacher," Nance said. "It made you re-evaluate the function of a school. We're so much numbers driven and how we're doing as far as academic achievement and that's important sometimes, but a key ingredient gets lost."

He said that ingredient is how students view the purpose of school, which is to have fun and make friends.

"Environment wise, if you change the culture and you make kids feel welcome and then you can achieve those things educationally," he said.

The program, which costs \$3,250 a year, is being funded via the school's activities account and community donations. He said that cost covers bringing in guest speakers to help raise the issue of compassion and kindness to the student body. On Monday, students will hear from Shane Hamman, a two-time Olympian weightlifter.

In addition to school assemblies, 100 student leaders from all backgrounds will go through training and form a club. They will work to spread the word to their groups of friends.

Nance said not just straight-A students were chosen. He said they looked for a group that really represented the student body, so that everyone would have a leader that they looked up to.

Nance said he hopes this program can help the school embrace its diversity.

"One of the biggest strengths of this school is also the hardest to overcome and it's our diversity. It's a great environment to learn from each other, but it can also cause divisiveness between kids," he said, adding that he's referring to racial, economic factors and different backgrounds that create that diversity.

Nance said this may also enhance school safety.

"A big aspect of safety in school is the students that get left behind or isolated can become a danger and this program makes a point to reach out to them," he said.

The program isn't just for the school. Nance is hoping to get the whole community on board. The school will kick-off the program with a school-wide assembly with Hamman Monday at 8:30 a.m. The community is invited to the same event later that night, from 6:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.

"I think the goal is to make this a community school and more than just a building — to create an environment where students are compassionate for others and care about others and the school and their success," he said.

Nance is hoping this takes off this year and can continue to be funded through the school and community donations in the future.

SO YOU KNOW

- **WHAT:** Shane Hamman, a two-time Olympian weightlifter, to speak at Rachel's Challenge event
- **WHEN:** Monday, Jan. 25 at 6:30 p.m.
- **WHERE:** Hazelwood Middle School

LEARN MORE:

- For more on Rachel's Challenge go to www.rachelschallenge.org. The program can be used in schools and businesses.

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