

The missing link: South-Doyle working on chain of kindness to change school culture

By Beth Drinnen

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At 13, Rachel Scott traced her hands on the back of an antique dresser and wrote these words within the outline: "These hands belong to Rachel Joy Scott and will, someday, touch millions of people's hearts." Four years later, while Rachel sat outside eating lunch at Columbine High School in Colorado, she was shot five times and killed during one of the worst school shootings in U.S. history.

Rachel's words have proven to be prophetic. On Thursday, students at South-Doyle Middle School met Larry Scott, Rachel's uncle and a speaker with Rachel's Challenge, an organization designed to combat hostility and violence through a "chain reaction" of kindness and compassion.

Days after her funeral, Rachel's father, Darrell Scott, found an essay she had written titled, "My ethics, my codes of life."

"I have this theory," Rachel wrote in her essay, "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."

"My brother started telling Rachel's story to people almost 10 years ago," Scott said. "Now we are reaching a million and a half to 2 million kids a year."

The students at South-Doyle sat in rapt attention as Scott explained the crux of Rachel's Challenge: that one kind action prompts another; how actions as simple as inviting the new kid in school to eat lunch with them can change a person's world; the power of forgiveness; and the strength that words hold. "There's no such thing as a small insult," Scott emphasized. "Words are power."

South-Doyle Principal Karen Harrel knows too well the truth behind that statement. "It's almost a daily thing where somebody said something ... that hurt somebody else," she said, "they don't think about it as bullying or harassing. The purpose for having the assembly is so the kids would see that what might be funny to them may be affecting someone else in a different way."

According to Scott, one of the things that makes Rachel's Challenge so effective is that it doesn't just focus on the problem. It offers a solution. "Kids are into it," Scott explained. "They want to know, 'What can I do?' "

Gary Carter, a sixth-grade student, certainly felt that way. “It would be kinda cool if a couple of people from each grade would get in a group or something and see how our school could do small things but make a big influence,” he said.

That’s exactly the plan the South-Doyle administration has in mind. After the presentation, about 100 students filed into the library to become charter members of the Chain Links Club, a middle school version of the Rachel’s Challenge social club, Friends Of Rachel.

Chain Links Club encourages the proliferation of compassion and kindness in three specific ways: working with the school office to welcome new students by walking them to class and inviting them to lunch; writing letters of appreciation to school and community members; and the Atmosphere of Kindness program, a poster and public service announcement campaign that focuses only on positive things.

“I think if the kids at South-Doyle can realize that just being nice to one person will reflect on another person, it will make the whole school a better place,” said Emma Vinson, a student in the eighth grade. “There’s a lot of grudges here, and I think they could all be lifted with just a little bit of help.”

Layla Mosadegh, a seventh-grade student, is no stranger to the power of kindness: “When my parents do even the smallest act ... for me and my sisters,” she explained, “like when they change their schedules just to be at a soccer game. When they do something like that, we just feel like we want to do something nice for them and a whole bunch of other people.”

Which, according to Scott, is the whole idea. “Helping other people is the key to a happy life,” he said emphatically. “Ask yourself, ‘What are the little things that you or I can do everyday to make a difference in the lives of other people?’ ” He paused. “I guarantee you will change the world.”

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