

## Students Learn From Those Who Have Survived The Odds

By Henry M. Holden

On Thursday, May 18 the Robert R. Lazar Middle School, in Montville hosted a "Living Lessons: Voices, Visions, and Values" program with more than 50 speakers recounting their heroic, diverse and powerful stories of dealing with adversity.

Woven throughout the presentations was the theme "surviving the odds." From genocide in Rwanda, the Holocaust, 9/11 survivors, or physical challenges, the speakers of "Living Lessons" shared with students in grades six to eight, their experiences in overcoming challenges, prejudices and discrimination.

With messages of fortitude, and accounts of courage and hope, Living Lessons was an extraordinary event held for the seventh time in 14 years.

"This program is designed to promote tolerance, compassion, and acceptance, among the school community," said Mrs. Sharon Carr, principal of the middle school. "It is our goal to provide students with the courage and strength to make a difference in today's world. Over the past year, we have worked hard to find speakers to share powerful stories of their life's events, and explore adversity, overcoming challenges, and discrimination."

Living Lessons segments lasted 40 minutes allowing students time to discuss a variety of contemporary issues such as bullying, racism and surviving war.

Lou Stiegelmayr joined the Marines right out of high school in 1966. He served three years, with one of those years in Viet-

nam where he was wounded three times, and awarded three purple hearts among other medals.

"Picture yourself not quite 19 years old, and you're in the jungles of Vietnam," said Stiegelmayr. "The enemy is throwing hand grenades and trying to kill you. My squad leader was standing up when a grenade went off. He was killed instantly, and since I was laying down I got hit with less shrapnel and earned my first Purple Heart. Then suddenly, I was in charge of the squad of 17 to 19-year-old Marines, just as frightened as I was," said Stiegelmayr to his audience of eighth-graders.

"No matter how much training you get, no one can prepare you for the reality of war," he said. "It is brutal, it is savage, and often unethical and immoral."

Stiegelmayr had to grow up fast or he would likely get killed. "People were getting killed all around me, and I wanted to survive."

"War does horrible things to people. Some are killed, many come home carrying physical injuries, or invisible scars of mental and emotional anguish that will last for the rest of their lives."

In addition to shrapnel still in his body, Stiegelmayr is dealing with the nearly always fatal aftermath of exposure to Agent Orange.

"Many people come back with major issues. I had them, and it took me a long time to work through them. You can carry emotional or physical problems with you all your life. If you do, they will drag you down and you will never reach your true potential, or

enjoy life."

Stiegelmayr didn't let his wounds or Agent Orange control his life. When he returned to civilian life he went to school at night, earned a degree in business, and got married to his wife Mary Lou, 44 years ago.

"You don't have to be a victim of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder," said Stiegelmayr, "to carry emotional and physical issues, and you can get help. If it's depression, or bullying, or discrimination, talk to a friend or a teacher or a parent, talk to anyone who will listen. There are people out there who can help you, but you must be willing to reach out to them. You don't have to face your issue alone."

"You can take control of your future by taking control of the present," he advised. "Become a leader in sports or academics and get an education. Education is the key to controlling your life in the way you wish it to be."

Prejudice, dealing with a physical disability and stereotyping were subjects discussed. One of those speakers was Dave Stevens.

Because of the morning sickness drug, Thalidomide, Dave Stevens was born without legs in 1966. While still in the hospital he was adopted and raised by two loving and supportive parents who instilled core values.

"I learned early on that it is better to have tried and failed, than to have never tried at all," said Stevens.

In the years before adaptive sports, Stevens played able bodied sports and became an athletic pioneer in his home state of Arizona. Without the use of prosthet-

ic legs, he went to Wickenburg High School in Arizona, and became the first and only 3-sport athlete in football, baseball and wrestling.

"It was tough in the beginning," said Stevens. "Nobody like me had ever done anything like this before. The state tried to keep me away from the sports thinking I was going to get hurt. They gave me special physicals, and special tests, and at one point I said, 'can I just get on the field and play?'"

"The first game they put me in there was a guy trying to run past me and I tackled him. He went down and I thought to myself, hey, I can really do this!"

Stevens became a champion wrestler winning several state tournaments. He



Dave Stevens effortlessly transitioned from his wheelchair to the top of the teacher's desk, in one smooth motion. Photo Henry M. Holden.

set state records in baseball for walks in a season, 48, and career, 146, and these records still stand to this day.

After many national

articles and a feature appearance on ABC's "That's Incredible," Stevens was awarded a scholarship to Augsburg College, in Min-

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## Students Learn...

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nesota, where he lettered in baseball and football.

It was there that he became the only legless football player in college football history. This led to a tryout with the Dallas Cowboys. His love for baseball never stopped and he continued to pursue his dream of playing professional baseball.

After tryouts with the 1984 Olympic baseball team, the Cincinnati Reds, and the Minnesota Twins, Stevens secured a three-week contract with the St. Paul Saints, in 1996. Stevens not only started a game at second base but even pinch hit for former Major League Baseball superstar Darryl Strawberry.

Stevens continues to work out with MLB and minor league teams around the country. To date Stevens is the only congenital amputee to ever play college football or minor league baseball.

"This is my normal," Stevens said as he effortlessly transitioned from his wheelchair to the top of the teacher's desk, in one smooth motion.

"I live in your world, you don't live in mine, and I wouldn't want it any other way. You can choose how you see people. Look at me, and you realize that you can do anything you want to, no excuses."

In addition to getting married, raising three sports-minded children Stevens also has won seven Emmy Awards for his many contributions to ESPN shows such as Sports Center, NFL Countdown and Baseball Tonight. He is now the assignment desk manager at ESPN where his team is responsible for coordinating coverage of

all sports teams in the US.

The students at Lazar Middle School have been fortunate over the past few years. They have learned many valuable lessons of life by listening to the first-hand accounts of people who have worked hard to overcome their own challenges.

One of those lessons came from Sally Alexander, who demystified disability. Alexander grew up a normal person. She had high school friends and as a young woman, she was as normal as thousands of other young women. Then, one day, everything changed. She started bleeding from her eyes. It was called retinal hemorrhaging, and at the age of 26, she was totally blind. But, that wasn't the worst of it. She soon started losing her hearing.

"This was a shock beyond what I had ever experienced or thought was possible," said Alexander. "There were no signs something was coming. It just happened! I was not prepared for this. I didn't know where to begin. I had one fabulous friend who was there for me during some of my darkest moments."

Alexander had to relearn everything; how to read, how to interact with people and how to become independent.

"I discovered the more I learned, the more it took away my sorrow," said Alexander. "I didn't want people leading me around by the arm, so I first learned to use a cane. Then I learned to use my senses, in a different more sensitive way. My cane became an extension of me, like a longer arm, but I even had to learn how to hold the cane in a certain way. I would listen

to the echoes my cane made and to other noises around me.

"Then I got my service dog 'Dave' and life became easier and safer, but the life I knew was changed forever."

Eventually Alexander earned a master's degree, married, worked full-time, and raised two children. She also began swimming, kayaking and living a full life.

"I couldn't read any more except for braille, but I could still listen to books," she said. "But, the books were all about sighted persons. None related to sightless people."

"I decided to write a book hoping to expose readers to differences as well as the values of diversity."

In five of her books Alexander writes about blindness with candor and humor, dispelling fears and demystifying disability.

In 1995, her autobiography, "Taking Hold: My Journey into Blindness," Alexander received the Christopher Medal for "artistic excellence and for affirming the highest values of the human spirit."

Today Alexander teaches in the MFA program, at Chatham University, Pittsburgh, PA., and leads critique groups is out of her home.

Organizers received feedback from the program.

Living Lessons" has changed the lives of students. A sample of letters written to guest speakers illustrate the power behind the messages sent on the day of the program taken from previous students.

"You inspired me because you showed no matter how difficult times will be, you can get through

them," one student wrote.

"I learned that you have to be aware of what you're doing every moment because you never know when that moment will become important," was another comment. These words clearly tell the story of their life changing experiences.

"Living Lessons" has helped our students learn to embrace and celebrate our differences and has given them the tools to use when faced with difficult times," said Carr. These powerful lessons are those that can only be taught by the ones who have lived through some of the most difficult

times in our world's history.

By the end of the day, people from all walks of life shared lessons of survival and perseverance with more than 900 middle school students in Montville Township Public Schools.

## Fairfield Falcons Youth Football Opens Tryouts

Registration is now open for Fairfield Recreation's Falcons football program.

The program is open to children in grades three through eight. They must be 7 years old, and not be 15 before July 31.

The season begins Aug. 14 and concludes in

mid-November. The fee for the program is \$270.

The Falcons are members of the West Essex Junior Football League and compete against surrounding communities. Players will be sized for uniforms by the recreation director on dates yet to be determined.

Any returning player in need of a new jersey will be charged an additional \$50. Practice jerseys cost an additional \$10. New players will be charged \$60 for both jerseys. For more information, call 973-882-2700. Registration forms are available online or at the recreation office.

## New Middle School Principal...

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families of Robert R. Lazar Middle School."

Pasciuto plays sports in his downtime as well. He and his family live in a lake community, so therefore they try to spend their time outdoors as much as possible. Pasciuto participates in co-ed soccer, co-ed kickball and men's softball within the community. He is also a member of his lake's athletic board and commissions their T-ball league.

"I am very active along with my family," he says. "Both my wife and I volunteer to coach multiple sports within the lake as well as working with other events in our community.

In addition, my wife and I enjoy taking day trips with our children. I am also a fitness enthusiast and avid reader."

Pasciuto will be replacing retiring Principal Sharon Carr.

"Robert R. Lazar Middle School is a very dynamic school in the very high performing school district of Montville Township Public Schools," says Pasciuto. "I plan on taking some time to learn about the Lazar culture and to really get to know the staff, students, and community. Once I have the opportunity to work with all the stakeholders and build relationships with the com-

munity, I am confident new goals and areas of exploration will be identified and new initiatives implemented. I believe this is an exciting and organic process that is based on evolving student and community needs as well as collective strengths."

Pasciuto leaves some parting words with Glen Rock High School.

"I will miss working with the staff, my direct assistant, and Principal John Arlotta the most. He is truly a major influence and friend. Of course, I will miss many of the students and families that I've worked with over the last two years."

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