

Heroes In Waiting

Anti-Bullying Program Helps Students

By Taylor Bollinger

In her application to the Heroes In Waiting Teen Advisory Board, one Edmond ninth-grader said, "I had a friend commit suicide because of bullying. I think about him a lot. I wish I would've known how he felt and that I could have helped him."

This student's story is not merely an anecdote, but rather, a glimpse into what the Academy of Pediatrics has labeled an epidemic. The Oklahoma Department of Education reported that almost 80% of Oklahoma children experience moderate to high depressive symptoms, while a similar study from the Oklahoma Department of Health showed that of the 23% of youth who have seriously considered suicide, 10% have actually attempted it.

But it's not enough to know those statistics. Awareness without action can only go so far. That's why Heroes In Waiting is reaching as many students as possible with anti-bullying curriculum and assemblies that the organization's Communications Strategist, Angie LaPaglia says are ultimately about mental wellness.



Heroes In Waiting assemblies include interactive segments to engage students and reinforce the concepts of peace-building and culture change.

The product of years of collaboration, Heroes In Waiting officially launched as a non-profit in 2023. The charge is led by Executive Director and Edmond resident, Jim Stewart, who understands the importance of their mission in the deepest possible way. Jim speaks openly of his son who was lost to suicide.

"Our son Marquise was special. He was a beautiful soul," Jim said. "He gave his life to others, and we want to give our lives the same way he did. We're giving our lives to kids in other communities, in other schools, and beyond."

So far, the team has brought the 12-lesson anti-bullying program to 70+ schools and held assemblies reaching more than 5,000 students, starting a ripple effect of education and empathy that can hardly be measured.

"In studies and surveys, kids are telling us they are not okay," Angie explained. "If we can intervene early and teach them things like what it means to belong, how to make friends, what to do with big feelings, how to build community and celebrate differences – if we can teach them things like that, then we've really done something."

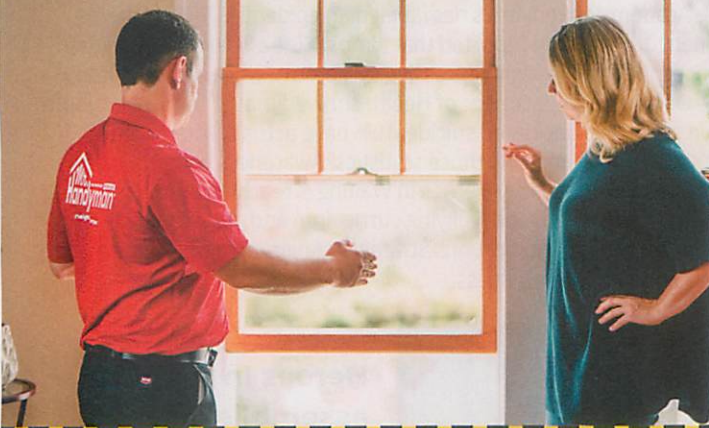
The free curriculum is broken up into 12 digestible sections that can be taught in classrooms, small groups, churches, or wherever kids gather. The organization's Anti-Bullying School Assemblies offer another format for delivering the "peace-building message kids need now." At the assemblies, NBA all-star hype guy Malcolm Tubbs engages students from third to twelfth grade in an interactive, high-energy 45-minute assembly.

One high school counselor said, "The program was more effective than I thought it could be, largely because he was able to get the students involved, and allow them to be fun and interactive while hearing an important message at the same time."

Angie said it's about creating a new culture for our children. "We are just one spoke in the wheel, but if we can go in and make a little bit of a difference, then that is what we are going to do."

She said there are two ways for people to get involved. "We always invite people to help us keep this curriculum free," she said. "It only takes ten dollars to bring the curriculum to one child." Adults can also download the curriculum or request an assembly at heroesinwaiting.org.

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