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Ventriloquist brings virtuous message to students**

By Christine Tam, Herald-Tribune staff



Comedy ventriloquist Val Hilliker brought her puppets and sense of humour to teach students at Grande Prairie's Composite High school about bullying, effective ways to communicate and how to stand up for yourself on Monday.

Her interactive shows and workshops use puppets to get students thinking about serious messages in a light-hearted way.

"It's a fun light-hearted approach to a very serious message. If they're laughing then they're learning and they're listening," Hilliker said. "They're remembering things. Rather than a person standing up there, if a puppet says it, they listen."

Being a victim of bullying herself is what inspired Hilliker to educate children and teenagers on the harmful effects of it.

"I was being picked on when I was little and all the way through school and all the way through adulthood," she said. "I finally decided to stand up for myself and get better emotionally."

Hilliker said that once she felt better emotionally, she experienced physical healing as well, most notably recovering from throat cancer.

Hilliker also teaches students about incorporating a list of 100 core virtues into their lives and using them to improve communication and listening skills in her Project Virtue workshops. The workshops explore virtues such as courage, reliability and truthfulness.

Her own journey into self-discovery through learning about the virtues and incorporating them into her life has improved relationships with her family and friends. It has empowered her to share the message with others in the hopes of making a difference and saving lives.

"We talk about suicide and how people will be suicidal if you start picking on them, so it gets really personal," Hilliker said.

Not being afraid to shy away from the tough issues is what makes Hilliker's puppet shows so unique and impactful.

"I'd like to be able to get kids to stand up for themselves and take responsibility for their reactions to when people are being mean and cruel," she explained. "So kids are able to make the right choices down the road when it comes to taking that responsibility. They know right from wrong but are they going to be able to do it when push comes to shove?"

Hilliker is hoping that by spreading her virtuous message, she can put an end to bullying.

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