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Banishing bullying

By ABBY ZIMET, Portland Press Herald Writer

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SIDNEY — Stan Davis - mentor, showman, therapist, activist, prodigious magician, lover of chess and ardent espouser of a "moral education" - is in his cinderblock cubbyhole of an office. With him is a ginger-haired fourth-grader, Evan Gleason, and a furry-haired hand puppet, Wofo, Mystical Mind-Reading Dog of the East. In gleeful collusion, they are telling bad jokes. Evan: "What's on top of a house?" Wofo: "Woof!" "What's on the outside of a tree?" "Bark!" "What's it feel like?" "Wuff!" It is lunchtime at the James H. Bean School, where Davis is guidance counselor, and they are taking a giddy break from the task at hand. Davis explains: "We were helping our new friend John get some friends."

The way it works: a new boy, John, picked three kids, including Evan, to be his "friendship team." Weekly for four weeks, they eat lunch with "Mr. Davis" to discuss how they've helped John - how they talked or ate or played with him. Reports Davis: "Soon our job will be done, and we can have ice cream and celebrate."

Teach, learn, care, celebrate: such is life under Davis' thoughtful tenure. At a time of unprecedented scrutiny of school violence, Davis has wielded an inventive grab bag of tools - science, reggae, rope tricks, chess - to craft a singular, nationally recognized anti-bullying program.

A former civil rights activist and child therapist, Davis has led more than 300 anti-bullying workshops for about 30,000 kids around the country. Unlike many violence-prevention models, Davis' argues that bullying is a learned abuse of power akin to racism or sexism, and a social problem that we all must solve. When not traveling, he is here, trumpeting the same fierce message: that kids, and the rest of us, must learn to do right by each other.

Ever-resourceful, Davis uses whatever he can to make his point. He cites pioneering research in Scandinavia. He runs a chess club. He performs tricks with hoops and fire that offer lessons in community and a "sense of wonder in cynical times."

And he pays attention - one on one, kid by kid, through what writer Pete Hamill calls "the excruciating dailyness of life."

The kids pick up on his passion, his goofiness, the clear-eyed way he stands up for them and anyone "underpowered." They clamor to eat lunch with him or seek solace from him or have him show them that cool rope trick, the one where you cut it, awww c'mon Mr. Davis . . .

A first-grader once asked if this job was his "mission." He thought a bit and then said yeah, actually, it is. And why not? He gets to be teacher, learner, healer, wizard. He gets to use science, which he reveres. And he gets to help right wrongs, to "even it up" in what he sees as a world of searing inequity.

"You take responsibility for what you can do yourself," he says. "My goal is to make everything that happens a teaching tool."

Today, notes Chris Toy, principal of Freeport Middle School, bullying is like drunken driving 15 years ago: "It's something that used to be okay that's not anymore." Toy recently asked Davis to come to Freeport to offer "some common language and strategies" to deal with the change.

The cafeteria is packed with raucous eighth-grade kids. Davis stands wordless, hoops on his arms, Australian fusion music blaring. He wears sneakers and a sports jacket over a blue and yellow T-shirt declaring, "Let Your Light Shine." A banner proclaims, "Attitude Is Everything."

Regal, hammy, still wordless, he hands out single hoops to a few smirking, blushing kids. He gestures to test the hoops. They yank on them: real. They hand them back.

Flamboyantly, Davis holds up the hoops, clangs two together, links them, clangs again, links three, clangs, links four, holds them aloft, bows. The kids, who have fallen into stunned silence, clap wildly.

"Now, what does all this have to do with bullying?" asks Davis, finally. "Metal rings, big noise, old trick, old magician . . ." The kids get it right away. Offers one, "We're all linked together to stop bullying, like the rings are."

For an hour Davis flies, mike in hand. He sets up a bullying scene: "Your ears are so big you look like Dumbo! And our bully's feeling - how? . . . We can do - what? . . . We have strength in . . .?" "Numbers!" they shout. He shows a girl how to water a paper flower from a glass pitcher that keep refilling itself. Friendship is like this water, he says: "The more you give, the more you get."

He holds an empty brown paper lunch bag, likening it to "the kid who sits alone at lunch, and gets the pity valentine from the teacher." People see the outside, but if they looked inside they'd see - pulling multicolored boxes out - "a . . . person . . . worth . . . being . . . friends . . . with!"

"Daa daa!" he exults, grinning like one of them. He ends with a soulful Jimmy Cliff singing, "You can get it if you really want . . ." and "Go out there and be heroes, guys!"

Davis calls this "the beginning of a conversation." Afterward, he has the kids fill out cards: "What did you learn? What do you want to know?" The questions range from poignant - "How do I get the courage to tell the bully to stop?" - to curious: "Were you bullied as a kid?"

Wise child. Now 54, Davis grew up in Brookline, Mass., "a fat, clumsy, unathletic, bookish Jewish kid. And I got bullied." He played in rock bands in high school, studied psychology in college, worked as an aide at a children's hospital, where he learned kids could change "with love and limits and help."

He married, moved to Maine in 1972, and for 20 years helped raise his two kids while working as a child therapist, school consultant and head of a mental health center. He went back to school to become a guidance counselor and behavior specialist.

As a therapist, he struggled to help kids who'd been bullied recover their self-esteem. But increasingly, he felt that making victims responsible for their own pain or loss "didn't work, spectacularly."

Researching bullying, he found the work of Dan Olweus, a Norwegian who saw bullying not as an immutable part of childhood, but as a willed abuse of power that adults, not victims, can work to change. Research shows that because aggressive behavior

in kids stems largely from inadequate parental involvement and inconsistent discipline, adult intervention is a key way to counter school violence.

For many, that violence means school shootings. But Davis notes that one in 10 kids is bullied, and one in 10 is a bully - making for 65 million targets, bullies and kids at risk. As he crafted his anti-bullying message, he began incorporating magic, "that incredible language." He seeks a balance: if the feedback is about tricks, not caring, "something's wrong." He has presented workshops for students and teachers on suicide, substance abuse and tobacco prevention as well as bullying. He only works at schools willing to set up ongoing programs with him.

The national work is in his spare time. Four days a week, he is at the Bean School, a K-6 elementary school of 380 students with an environment Davis praises as "affirming and enriched." Under a state mandate, his job as guidance counselor is three-pronged: to work with individual kids at risk and their families, teach guidance and life skills, and deal with crises.

When Davis came, says Nancy Reynolds, Bean's principal, the school had seen a rise in violent behavior. Since adopting a systemic anti-bullying program - with a discipline code ranking offenses - there has been a steady decline in violent and just plain mean behavior. The system, she says, "has absolutely changed the atmosphere of the school." Today, the atmosphere feels timeless, small-town cozy. The cinderblock walls are awash in construction paper art. The adults smile. The children brim with squeaky good cheer. Outside every room is a Martin Luther King quote, Davis' mantra: "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends." Below is a list of three ways to stop bullying: "Tell the bully to stop. Tell a teacher. Reach out in friendship."

Davis' presence is pervasive, kinetic. As he swoops through the halls in his sneakers and tousled hair - his palm pilot, or "spare brain," at his waist - the kids converge on him. A bevy of nine whispering girls in ponytails approaches. "Hi, ladies," he croons. One leans into him, conspirational: "Can we talk to you after . . .?" He nods sagely, sets up a time.

A boy dangling a scrap of rope in his hand rushes up, seeking help with a trick. Later, Davis tells him. Another boy, chunky and sad-looking, asks if he can come eat lunch with him. The next shift is full, Davis says; how about the one after that? Davis' lunchtime gatherings draw big crowds. They "rarely talk about anything serious." Often, they tell jokes: "Why do vampires drink blood? Because root beer makes them burp." The packed soirees are "my big way of staying connected - it keeps my finger on the pulse of things." Woof et al also mean that "if a kid has a problem and needs to come in here, it's not scary."

The pithy walls of Davis' office bear a Hopi proverb: "Take care when you speak in judgment. Words are powerful weapons." There are photos of Albert Einstein, Amelia Earhart, Nelson Mandela, Cesar Chavez, Jane Goodall, Helen Keller. A sign asks who are they and "why are they Mr. Davis' heroes?" Why? "They did something differently from how it'd been done before, and we all benefited."

There are also peace treaties he has helped draw up between kids: S.H.: "I want A.B. not to talk about me behind my back . . ." A.B.: "I want S.H. to stop accusing me of things . . ." Until age 12 or so, says Davis, kids' malleability makes it easier to change their behavior and the culture that gives rise to it. To do so, he uses repetition, with

science behind it. Hence, the three-point anti-bullying credo. The endless reminders to stand up for each other. The daily sing-songy chanting refrain to make it "Another Fabulous Day At The James H. Bean School!"

Connections seem to get made. Davis's grade 2 class drew pictures of how they're superheroes in life. Super Nate lets his brother share the computer. Super Molly helps her mom clean. Days later, a cluster of them go down the hall to sing screechily to a teary-eyed secretary who's leaving, "You're the greatest secretary at the James Bean School!" Afterward, a girl races past Davis and squeals, "We were just superheroes!"

Always, he makes them think. In a grade 4 class, he uses a favorite tool: a 1944 book called "The Hundred Dresses" about Wanda, a poor immigrant girl who gets bullied. He prods them: "How does she feel? Who has the power here? How could you solve this problem?" Then, magic. A piece of rope: "Here at the Bean School, we work at being all one family . . . (snips it with scissors) but some people fight, and do not get along . . . (snip) Our goal is to work things out . . . (holds its two ends up) . . . so we can all be connected . . . and be one again!" He stands grinning before a perfect silence. "Okay, gotta go!" he says. He speeds out, kids nipping at his heels: "But how did you . . .?"

In the classroom, he is amiable but firm, quieting the rowdy with a loud, "Young people!" And he keeps at them, teaching magic tricks and life lessons all in one.

He tells them he might practice a trick 300 times; practice, he says, is key. He praises a boy clutching a piece of rope who doesn't try his trick in class; restraint, he notes, is good. He does each trick with joy and flair, thus inviting them to join him in accomplishing amazing things.

"A moral education is not telling someone what to do," he says. "It's important to me that young people feel they can do something to make their school and home and world better."

To Davis, chess is "the great equalizer," its own definer of greatness. Once a week, his 35 chess players - the youngest, a 5-year-old girl - gather in the gym to bend over plastic boards and learn to think ahead. He sits to play a boy. They play fast and hard, swapping pieces without pity. Davis misses taking one key rook, but stays ahead. He murmurs "check" three times, then "mate." The boy looks up, dismayed. Then he looks down, carefully tracking each piece, each possible move to make sure it is truly hopeless. "You checked," says Davis, surprised. The boy looks nervous: he has doubted, he has challenged, he has questioned authority. Davis smiles. "Very good," he says.