

Local Schools



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Autism Ambassador Opens Up to Students

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Poplar Bluff, Missouri - Poplar Bluff Junior High School students had a chance to view the world from another lens last week.

“Finding Kansas” author Aaron Likens spoke about what it is like to live with Asperger’s syndrome, an autism spectrum disorder he was diagnosed with at the age of 20, prior to which he did not realize he was different.

“If you met one person with autism, you met one person with autism,” said the 33-year-old on Wednesday, Jan. 25, in the gymnasium. “One person’s Kansas can be another person’s opposite of Kansas.”

Kansas to Likens is a state of mind; a place of familiarity where he feels “safe, confident and normal,” his book states. For him that locale happens to be the racetrack, having grown up a mile from the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. In addition to presenting over 800 times about autism awareness through Easter Seals Midwest in St. Louis, Likens is a successful flagman at racing events across the country.

The author of the blog “Life on the Other Side of the Wall” available at www.aaronlikens.com, Likens discovered writing as a way to express himself, he said, admitting that the craft was merely a “painful” task for him in grade school. “I’d like to say it was a noble effort – wanting to make the world a better place,” Likens said.

To the seventh and eighth graders, Likens variously described himself in a light-hearted way as unfiltered, hypersensitive and routine oriented. Individuals affected by the condition may not be good judges of body language and take things very literal, he added.

“Those with Asperger’s see and process the world around us differently,” Likens said, quite simply. Although these may seem like common traits in people, Likens explained that there are different degrees. While he is clearly well-educated about the interworking of his mind, he said he does not recognize his pattern of behavior until after the fact.

In 1980, one in 1,500 people were documented to have autism, in 1997 that number grew to one in 500, now one in 68 Americans are diagnosed with the disorder, said Likens, citing the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A new incident rate will be released in the near future.

According to the most recent studies which, Likens noted, are incomplete, Asperger’s appears to be “a wiring issue” through which information is processed in a part of the brain that should not be receiving the signal.

R-I Special Services Director Mindy Garrett, who booked the event, said she selected the Junior High age level because students are particularly receptive to building “empathy and compassion” at that age. Likens agreed that his favorite type of audience consists of pre-teens and teenagers because of their thoughtful questions.

“It’s such an honor to be able to present at schools,” Likens posted on his public Facebook page afterward. “This student after my (presentation) came up to me and said that it was so thrilling to see someone with his diagnosis speak and to finally know he isn’t alone.”

About three-fourths of the students Aaron Likens spoke to about living with Asperger’s syndrome indicated they know someone with autism spectrum disorder.

Article and photo submitted by Tim Krakowiak, Communications/Marketing Director, Poplar Bluff R-I School District

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