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PB Alumnus Returns for Black History Month Assembly

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Poplar Bluff, MO - A Poplar Bluff alumnus who leads intercity youth development training throughout the country shared his “tips for a successful life” on Thursday, Feb. 27, during an assembly observing Black History Month at Junior High.

“Get connected,” “stay away from messy people” and remember that “you have value,” stated Cortez Higgs, founder of The Catalyst Effect, to the seventh and eighth grade audience in the gymnasium.

The first piece of encouragement from Higgs pertained to students participating in activities outside of the school day, whether it is athletics, band or another extracurricular club

“A lot of you, if you don’t get connected or engaged, you’re going to live inside a box,” the PBHS Class of 1996 graduate said. “...You only have so much room to go inside the box before you hit the wall.

His next piece of advice was a cautionary tale about associating with the wrong crowd, and how succumbing to peer pressure can ruin one’s chances for a hopeful future.

Higgs used \$5 from his wallet to demonstrate his final lesson of the day. He captured the reaction of a group of volunteers after dropping the bill on the ground and stomping on it.

When asked if Zoe Freeman would accept the money even though he proceeded to “call it names,” the student replied affirmatively, explaining that it still “has value.” Higgs rewarded the student with \$10 for providing such an astute answer.

“Just like this money, no matter what anyone says or does to you, what they say or do to you does not determine your value,” Higgs concluded. “In spite of the mistakes you make, in spite of the issues or the families you’re with, in spite of what clothes you have, where you live – you have value.”

At the beginning of his lecture, Higgs noted that he grew up in poverty and was the child of a teenaged mother. Despite having experienced some trauma in life, he said, he went on to become an ordained minister, having studied biblical theology at Bethel College, and served as a petty officer in the U.S. Navy, among other feats.

Higgs currently resides in Newport News, Va., with a wife and four children. He has traveled to 45 schools across the country through the Department of Justice, discussing race relations and gang violence prevention.

The schoolwide assembly was spearheaded last year by paraprofessional LaRonda Mack and co-teacher Courtney Rutledge of the Life Skills class. Rutledge graduated with Higgs, and helped arrange for the visit this year. For the remainder of the program, a planning committee was formed that also had student representation.

Other features of the annual event included a performance of “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing,” known as the Black National Anthem, led by student Leara Hopson; a special tribute to the late Kobe Bryant; a living museum featuring the depiction of 30 black inventors by students; and a mural contest. The Life Skills students prepared a lunch for the invited guests.

Pictured: Poplar Bluff native Cortez Higgs of The Catalyst Effect receives an ovation from the audience following his Black History Month speech.

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

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