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Sartell teens get help from TV star with S.O.S. project

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SARTELL — Three Sartell kids want to save the world, one project at a time. And they're calling on the 1,011 students of Sartell Middle School to lend a hand.

In the past year, Jenna Sjogren, Brooke Radi and Shawn Sullivan created a group called Save Our Selves and found funding for it. Last week, a celebrity visit helped them explain S.O.S.'s purpose: motivate kids to think about making a difference and act on their ideas.

"By saving ourselves, we save the world," Shawn Sullivan said.

"We're not telling them to do it. We're challenging them to get involved," Radi said.

The three seventh-graders knew it would take more than an ordinary pep rally. So they invited a celebrity expert on positive change.

Paul DiMeo, from the Emmy Award-winning series "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition," spent a day last week at Sartell Middle School.

"What starts here can grow, as long as we — all of us — embrace what they're trying to do," DiMeo said. "If we can get this to grow in this school, it can spread to the next school and the next and into the next city, the next county. That's what we shoot for."

And if the S.O.S. team has its way, the program will start a cascade of community service projects that spreads worldwide.

Making a difference

As sixth-graders, Radi, Sjogren and Sullivan knew what they wanted to do, but weren't sure if they could accomplish it. So they kept the project secret for the next 12 months.

Their first task was finding the right celebrity voice for their project. They chose DiMeo because his work with "Extreme Makeover" paralleled their hopes: serving and inspiring communities.

The trio calculated the cost of bringing DiMeo to Sartell. They figured they would need \$2,000 for transportation and expenses if he waived a speaker's fee.

To raise the money they researched grant sources, wrote applications and made presentations to nonprofit organizations.

Kathy Sullivan remembers watching her 12-year-old son spend hours on the computer.

"I assumed he was playing computer games," Kathy Sullivan said. "I asked him what he was doing one night and he told me he was writing a grant. I was amazed."

S.O.S. applied for grants from the Sartell-St. Stephen Education Foundation and Youth As Resources of the United Way. They had a mission statement, goals, a budget and plans for a school assembly.

"They presented them with these packets with everything they needed to budget for the program. And they did it all on their own," Assistant Principal Julie Tripp said.

The trio's efforts paid off. They were awarded both grants.

"We were impressed when their grant application came in. It was so thorough, so professional. It took us only a few minutes to decide to do it," said Jim Barkley, a member of the Sartell-St. Stephen Education Foundation board. The foundation made a \$1,000 grant to S.O.S.

Catching a star

With funding in hand, the students turned their attention to enticing DiMeo to join their cause.

For the entire year they lobbied him with e-mails and phone calls. They pleaded their case to publicists. Finally they found a sympathetic ear: DiMeo's wife.

"My wife, Kelly, said 'You've got to look at what these kids are doing,'" he said.

In the beginning of October the S.O.S. team got good news: DiMeo would be in Minnesota filming his show, and he wanted to join them for a day.

"I think that ... what they're doing is phenomenal," DiMeo said. "They are not looking for help from anyone but themselves. I find that very compelling."

To top it off, DiMeo decided to donate his expense money back to the school for community projects.

S.O.S. had its spokesman and \$2,000 to start its campaign.

On set

Radi, Sjogren and Sullivan joined DiMeo on the "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" set Oct. 5 in Albert Lea. They presented him with a schedule, a PowerPoint presentation and talking points for the day.

Tripp accompanied the students and was amazed at their welcome.

"They spent three hours with them talking about their plans, listening to their dreams and introducing them to everyone under the sun, from the director to all the stars of the show," Tripp said.

While they were there, they were interviewed by ABC.com. DiMeo joined them for the interview as they discussed S.O.S. The segment will be available on the ABC Web site later this month.

S.O.S. launched

Faculty and students learned Oct. 6 about the S.O.S. program and their impending celebrity guest. Students were invited to submit questions for DiMeo. Their No. 1 question? "What can I do?"

To help answer that, S.O.S. organizers planned a brainstorming session with DiMeo and members of the Student Council, Youth Devoted to People and Peer Helpers. They created a list of project ideas to be posted on the school Web site.

"Kids have enough examples of what not to do. We need examples of what to do," Radi said.

On Thursday, Radi, Sjogren and Sullivan introduced their guest and their project to the school. DiMeo spent his day meeting with staff and student groups.

"We need your brains," DiMeo said. "And we need you to educate others."

There are no better causes than helping other people and helping the environment.”

Then it was off to the school's North Gym to speak to the student body.

DiMeo's sure they are more than aware of what needs to be done.

“It's a scary world. If we think our children are not seeing it, we are so wrong,” DiMeo said. “It's in their hands. They are the ones who are going to need to fix it. And they're not waiting around for someone else to do it.”

DiMeo suggested that if they started small, their efforts would eventually yield big results.

“World peace, that's a tough one,” DiMeo said. “But if we start with what is right here, that's a wonderful start.”

S.O.S. had one last surprise. They brought Mark McGowan of the vocal group Tonic Sol-Fa to the stage to announce that Tonic Sol-Fa was donating 20 tickets to a Dec. 30 Paramount performance as prizes. Ticket winners will be invited backstage after the show.

“We thought it was outstanding what these seventh-graders were doing — dreaming big and thinking big,” McGowan said. “We wanted to offer some incentive to encourage them.”

Projects

Though they've accomplished their first goal, the S.O.S. collaborators are not resting on their laurels. They each carry a three-ring binder packed with plans.

Radi hopes to collaborate with her friends on a Support the Spork campaign to convince the school to cut disposable utensil use in half by replacing traditional plastic spoons and forks with sporks, a hybrid of the two.

“The school currently uses 1,900 plastic utensils a day if each student takes both a spoon and fork,” Radi said. “It would save money and decrease plastic waste.”

Sullivan is hoping to see the middle school add solar panels. He's researching options and looking for grants.

Sjogren wants to start a program called Big Siblings of the Environment.

The program would pair middle school students with elementary kids to build environmentally friendly crafts, teaching leadership skills while educating young children about energy-conscious choices.

Any obstacles they have encountered have only inspired the trio.

When asked what challenges they faced, Sjogren issued a challenge of her own: “What's stopping you from doing what you can to help?” Sjogren asked.
