

Student brings touch of 'Wonder' to Power Upper El

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John Stormzand | Staff Photographer

Peter Dankelson wears a prosthetic ear, has a misshapen jaw and can't eat or speak like most other kids.

He has just one kidney, a feeding tube for supplements and medication, and an opening in his neck from a tracheotomy, concealed by a thin adhesive pad.

He also has a contagious grin, a super-friendly personality, an incredibly positive attitude, a love of "all things Star Wars" — and a message: "Don't be afraid to be friends with someone who is different."

Peter, a 12-year-old Highland resident and sixth-grader at St. Patrick's School in White Lake, shared that message — and a bit about his life so far — with fifth-grade and sixth-grade students at Power Upper Elementary School in Farmington Hills last Tuesday.

Power teachers Jill Mishanec and Brittnay Webster invited Peter and his mom, Dede Dankelson to the school after their classes read the book *Wonder*, a story of a 10-year-old boy, Auggie, with physical differences similar to Peter's. The R.J.Palacio novel, which Mishanec said is "basically about the 'choosing kind' concept," was recently piloted by Oakland Schools for its fifth grade core [curriculum](#)




The two teachers found Dede through Twitter, started following her blog and then invited her and Peter to speak at Power to bring the story to life — while encouraging students to embrace differences rather than fear them.

Moments before his presentation began, Peter admitted he was a bit nervous — yet eager to visit with the other preteens. "I want to do this because it (will be) pretty fun, and I just want to tell kids to be kind," he said.

Challenges

Peter's challenges are due to Goldenhar Spectrum, a craniofacial syndrome characterized by abnormal prenatal development of the hands and face. He also has a malformed spine and other physical irregularities.

Along with viewing a [video](#)

/photography presentation about Peter and other kids with craniofacial syndrome — peppered with inspirational  quotations from *Wonder* and others — students got an up-close look at feeding and tracheotomy tubes, as well as a prosthetic ear. Several students also jumped at the opportunity to ask Peter and his mother questions about bullying and teasing and hurt feelings, practical matters such as attaching the prosthetic ear each day, and other challenges.

Though Dede recounted how a youngster recently called Peter "creepy," Peter said he's fortunate that for the most part kids treat him kindly and he's never been bullied. Unfortunately, that's not always the case with others, he added.

What's needed, he said, is easily summed up. "You should just always choose kind," he said.

Following the presentation, Power Principal James Anderson called it "spectacular."

“It had an excellent message — and from the looks on the kids' faces you could really see its impact, that they were really taking it in,” he said. “Every kid's eyes were glued on that presentation.”

For fifth-grader Athan Mitsias, Peter's visit made it clear that “if you look different, it doesn't mean you are.”

Added fellow fifth-grader Durrion Smith: “I think I got to know him better — he acted just like Auggie. And it was really nice to meet him.”

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