

"Conversation Toward a Brighter Future" talk sparks enthusiasm, spotlights future plans

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
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EDWARDSVILLE - Thursday's "Conversation Toward a Brighter Future" discussion and High School Fellows Reception at the **Mannie Jackson Center For The Humanities** was filled with enthusiasm from the student participants and everyone else present.

The area high school students discussed projects they had started in the day of discussing "Conversation Toward a Brighter Future" in line with the four pillars of the MJCFH: "Respect, Dignity, Understanding and Forgiveness."

MJCFH Executive Director Dr. Ed Hightower beamed with pride during the entire morning as students presented their proposals and plans for the coming year with their work.

"We challenged you to put a proposal around a concern at your school and find a solution to that problem," he said. "That solution is to be measurable and capable of replication and sustainable.

"You are the future. You are the individuals who are creating a new discuss, a discuss that will permeate and be emulated across the country, whereby other school districts and communities will pick up what you have done."

Hightower talked of how **U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin** visited MJCFH and viewed the research projects the students were doing and was simply “blown away,” by the depth of what he saw.

“He looked at all the projects and abstracts,” Hightower told the audience. “He saw that you have an opportunity to pave the way for a new type of positive conversation for young people.”

Madison County Chairman Alan Dunstan told the students that he and other leaders will eventually be retiring and others are going to have to step up and take over. He said what they are doing with MJCFH and this project are going to pay dividends for the future. He congratulated all the students on such excellent proposals.

Bob Daiber, regional superintendent of schools, commended the students and MJCFH for such excellent work and said he was excited to see what developed from all the proposals. **Sydney Ehmke**, project coordinator, was also singled out by Dr. Hightower for such exceptional work. The facilitators were **Dr. James Kerr, Sean Hill, Chris Head, Annice Brave, LaDonna Whitner, Andrew Reinking and Deb Pitts**.

Edwardsville Mayor Hal Patton started his brief presentation by saying oxygen is important for existence, but communication is vital for society.

Patton told a story of a friend, Ben, he had in high school who was black and he played sports with him and always called him by his first and last name. Without realizing it, 10 years later, the friend said at a class reunion, the two were talking about high school and Edwardsville. The man said racism did exist, even in Edwardsville. He said he didn't like that Hal had called him by both of his names. He stressed that Hal didn't do it with the other teammates and felt it was almost racist in nature. Patton was upset that he had made him feel that way and wished back then Ben had said something about it.

“I cared a lot about Ben and with a little dialogue back then it could have been fixed,” Patton said. “If he had said that to me then, I would have stopped from that point on. Communication is important as the oxygen we breathe.”

SEE PHOTO GALLERY BELOW:

Alton High School, Project Name: The Bridge Program

Speakers for the Alton High The Bridge program said the motto for the group is to inspire a brighter future.

“The issue that we found in our school there is a general disconnect between students, teachers, administrators and the community,” an AHS group spokesperson said. “Our goal is to close that disconnect and create a more positive climate and install respect, forgiveness, dignity and understanding into our students and prevent those problems. Once a problem happens, we want to rebuild the relationship with the student and teacher and prevent future problems from happening.”

Edwardsville High School, Project Name: New Student Ambassadors

“It is a difficult thing for new students coming in as a freshman or being a new student,” one of the EHS presenters said. “Imagine walking in a school with 2,000 new faces; it can be overwhelming.”

Nickie Cashdollar moved to Edwardsville and started attending Edwardsville High School as a junior. She helped found an organization called **New Student Ambassadors (NSA)**.

“I didn’t know anyone here,” she said on a video played by the EHS cast. “I realized after a while how many new students were here ever year. This past year the program helped 85 new students. When the students come in we pair them with someone they have something to talk about through sports, coming from some state or something like that.”

The goal for Edwardsville High is to build upon what has been accomplished this past year through NSA.

The Edwardsville group will use the Four Pillars of MJCFH and it will help new students integrate into the school system. The hope is to reach out to other groups and unify the school.

Center For Educational Opportunities, Project Name: Understanding Under Extreme Conditions

A video was finished to be presented to parents and students and shared with other students in the school district by this group. The goal of the group was to create a video based on key words of the Mannie Jackson Center For The Humanities Foundation. The students also did a storyboard of what needed to be put in the video, then put the scenes together.

East Alton-Wood River Community High School, Project Name: Every Action & Word = Respect

East Alton-Wood River Community High School will begin with the respect issue with a shoe drive in September. A quote was given that "You won't fully understand anyone until you walk a mile in their shoes. That's the best way to see and understand." The project will continue through the year.

Civic Memorial High School, Project Name: Fresh Mentors

"The goal is a more connected student body," one of the CM presenters said. "In every transition in our lives we need a new sense of connection. Schools try to promote this by offering extracurricular activities but those only involve a certain amount of people. We want to connect freshmen with upperclassmen through the year and make them feel welcome and wanted and more involved. The connected students are better students and will do it with their grades, attendance and discipline."

Collinsville High School, Project Name: Relationships Matter

The plan is to start with a welcome back approach and dedicate the month of September to respect. Staff will have lunch with students and teachers will have large posted notes for students to write something positive and much more.

Granite City High School, Project Name: The Ripple Effect Of Attitude

The first pillar is respect and Granite City High School is working to bring it to a whole new level and work with students and teachers to learn more dignity with others. A role reversal is planned for students to understand how the office and school is run.

Other Projects:

Madison Senior High School, Project Name: Relating To Others – Helping To Change Your Perspective

Triad High School, Project Name: PAUSE – Forge Relationships, Make Connections, Increase Acceptance

Conclusion

Dr. Hightower took a quote from one of the presentations to emphasize one of the Four Pillars of MJCFH and it was likely the most profound statement of the day:
“Forgiveness warms the heart and cools the sting.”

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