

■ PEOPLE: Featureless denim doll inspires students

Making Somebody from Nobody

TIFFANY MAYER
Standard Staff

Kaitlin Blanchfield wants to have a tea party.

At rapid-fire speed, she lists other activities that could benefit the Neurofibromatosis Society of Ontario.

She could hand out bumper magnets, maybe find guest speakers to talk about the disease.

Kaitlin sounds like a PR pro. In actuality, she's a Grade 6 student at Connaught School who has Nobody to thank for inspiring her to act on behalf of a cause little-known to most, but commonplace for Kaitlin.

Her younger sister Lexie has the progressive neurological disorder that can lead to disfigurement from tumours that form on the body's nerve endings.

Until recently, Kaitlin kept that to herself. But last fall, the arrival at her central St. Catharines school of a nameless, genderless, religion-less, faceless doll named Nobody compelled her to let her classmates into her world.

To educate them. To motivate them to help. To become a Somebody.

With Nobody by her side, Kaitlin stood at the front of her character education class with a giant bristol board display she spent five hours putting together. It told the story of Lexie, their relationship and the effects Neurofibromatosis, or NF, will have on their lives.

At the end of her talk, her teacher, Jennifer Jinks, was in tears. Nobody, the central figure of the Who is Nobody? character education program, was en route to developing an identity.

Kaitlin was also a changed person.

"I felt special," she said. "Everyone was listening and no one was fooling around. It spread awareness around the school."

"Lots of people know about NF now and they're not going to come up and ask certain things. To me, it's really passionate and Lexie is so close to me and means a lot to me."

Who is Nobody? is the brainchild of Kelly Clark, a former teacher from Toronto who saw her students seeking — almost desperately — a sense of purpose.

"It was always frustrating for me to see other kids trying to fit in in superficial ways, hoping to fit in with certain people, or by wearing certain clothes," Clark said. "I wanted them to be building self-esteem around something that was earned and lasting."

Who is Nobody? comes to classrooms in a suitcase. Students try to infer what's inside the case laden with touristy bumper stickers. After some discussion, the case is opened, and Nobody, a featureless denim doll emerges.

Nobody is a metaphorical clean slate, a non-judgmental muse without boundaries for students, Clark said.

"Whenever something is nothing or blank ... it's really exciting. Anything can happen. It's wide open and the possibilities are endless," she said.

"Everyone can relate to a nobody. Some people can relate to it. Others just want to help it."

Students spend time with Nobody as they work on projects



Camryn Asham, a Grade 5 student at Connaught School, and Kaitlin Blanchfield, in Grade 6, work with Nobody, a genderless, ageless, nameless doll that they and their classmates are turning into a somebody through various philanthropic and educational acts.

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that are a call to action for them and their classmates. A cause, current event or personal experience are fodder for presentations that are really opportunities to become a somebody in the eyes of their peers, their community and, most of all, to themselves.

In the three years since Nobody was born, Clark has watched it pull students from the cracks they are on the brink of falling through and build camaraderie and self-esteem in some of the toughest schools.

A large part of that success is because of the brilliance of the concept. But that concept has been able to flourish, reaching 25,000 Ontario students and counting, ever since the Ministry of Education incorporated character education into the curriculum two years ago.

The intention of character education is to take school beyond training minds and creating engaged, productive citizens who have empathy and respect for others.

However, many schools had been doing character education before the ministry gave a formal title and language to it, said Sue Eghoetz, a school support services system administrator with the District School Board of Niagara.

"We were doing it because it was good practice," she said.

Who is Nobody? is one of several character education teaching tools DSNB teachers can use. But Nobody is fast becoming the most popular kid at schools

in Niagara since teacher Katie McClymont at Greendale School in Niagara Falls first used it locally last year.

About 35 DSNB teachers have Nobody in their classes this year. Another 25 teachers attended a workshop last month to learn about the doll that is transforming students in all grades and communities throughout Ontario.

Nobody's appeal is its non-threatening, featureless form,

Eghoetz said. That makes Nobody empowering.

Take the student at Greendale, whose father read him a news story about St. Catharines council contemplating a beaver culling program last year to deal with the lumber-loving rodents felling city trees.

The boy wanted to save the beavers and began calling local politicians, Eghoetz said. He even managed to get one politico into class to talk about the

importance of the buck-toothed critters.

"That was fabulous. This seven-year-old boy feels he can call his MP's office and make a difference," Eghoetz said.

"You can imagine the power of that versus a teacher standing at the front of the classroom talking."

Back at Connaught, where Jinks teaches character ed., she has seen Kaitlin blossom thanks to Nobody.

Warned by Kaitlin's previous teachers that she was a natural leader with the ability to make or break a class, Jinks said she's been able to "reach" Kaitlin with Nobody's help.

"She was doing things to let me know she was there. I liked what I saw in there but she just needed an outlet. When Nobody came around, that kid just flew out of there," Jinks said.

Nobody has been the catalyst for other classroom coups.

Nobody, who will graduate to being a Somebody in June, has enabled shy students, like Camryn Asham, to speak up and raise \$140 for a Tanzanian orphanage.

It's something she said she would never have done without Nobody to inspire her. She's planning other fundraisers for the orphanage now.

"I wanted (my classmates) to learn there are some people over there who don't have as much as we have," the Grade 5 student said. "We wanted to give money

to them so we could get them stuff and let them know that someone wanted to help them."

For Husnia Masire, who came to Canada a year-and-a-half ago from Kabul, Afghanistan, Nobody provided an open invitation to her classmates into her life as a Muslim.

Wearing a dress in the pink, green and gold that represents Kabul, Husnia told the people of her new homeland about Eid-al-Adha, one of the most important celebrations in Islam.

By the end of her presentation, both worlds were less foreign to each other and Husnia was finally comfortable in both.

"It made me really happy because someone learned about something I told them," the Grade 6 girl said. "I'd never done anything like this before because I didn't think my English was very good."

They learned mostly how to treat other people. There are people from different cultures and that doesn't mean they're not the same. I was really scared to talk in front of people. I learned it's not that scary, it's exciting."

A tiny bell, taken from Masire's dress, is pinned to Nobody's torso, signifying another interest for it, another transformational moment at Connaught.

"I'm proud of the kids and I'm moved to see what they can do," Jinks said. "It shows them how much power they have to make changes in the world."



JULIE JOCSAK Standard Staff

Connaught School Grade 4 student Sean Chikanda, left, and Grade 5 student Simba Rasen, grade 5, present their project on Zimbabwe, from which both boys hail. The featureless doll Nobody sits on the chair in the foreground.