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Turning nobody into somebody

Blue denim doll demonstrates everyone's special uniqueness

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THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR
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Nobody is out and about in Grimsby. For the past few months, Nobody has been going to school, to church, the hospital, the animal shelter, even to local hockey games. In fact, Nobody is well on the way to becoming Somebody, thanks to the 28 Grade 6 kids at Nelles Public School.



Nobody showed up at the school in December with nothing -- no face, no gender, no interests or abilities, no friends, no age, no ethnic or cultural identity and no character. Just a head, torso and limbs.

The nondescript blue denim Nobody doll arrived in a cardboard suitcase addressed "To Everybody from Nobody."

Teacher Wayne Hodgson tormented his students for a few minutes by leaving the suitcase unopened atop a filing cabinet before initiating a discussion on what might be inside.

"They were intrigued -- they could see that it was a blue doll of some sort -- but once they got a sense of what it was all about, they got really excited."

What it's all about is character building.

Nobody is the creation of Torontonion Kelly Clark, a former teacher frustrated by students who fail to see the value of their own uniqueness. They all want to be alike and ostracize those who aren't. And it's the same in every classroom.

Since its introduction in 2007, the Nobody program has been used by 65 school boards, 600 schools and about 25,000 students of various ages.

And the numbers are growing, not only in schools but other groups such as churches, team-builders and women's shelters.

Nobody comes with an explanatory DVD and supplemental materials that demonstrate how the exercise can teach such traits as integrity, respect, empathy, honesty, perseverance and fairness.

In a letter sent home to parents, Hodgson explained that students would be choosing projects to introduce Nobody to positive life experiences and bringing Nobody home for a week to help enact them.

"With each positive experience Nobody is engaged in, it will slowly, through the year, gain a personality and develop into Somebody that is special," he wrote.

Students were to decide on a project that would help a cause or individuals in the community, carry it out, document it with photographs, make a presentation to the class, enter the details in the official Nobody scrapbook and, finally, add some kind of trinket to Nobody's body to represent the project.

Student Andrea Wasyleczko undertook a Kupcakes For Kids baking spree that raised \$350 for the McMaster Children's Hospital and earned Nobody a necklace with the hospital logo.

Kylee Vanderlee sold homemade chocolates to raise funds for the Lincoln County Humane Society, which gave Nobody a rubber LCHS bracelet.

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Shannon Colling and Baylea Toth collected 450 gently used stuffed animals for Grimsby and Lincoln firefighters to give to children from house fires. Nobody got a fire hat.

The doll acquired eyes with a pair of Bicycles for Humanities lapel buttons, a yellow ribbon for letters the class wrote to overseas troops at Christmas, and a little book to represent the 800 used books that were collected for five area resource centres.

Hodgson picked up the Who Is Nobody? package at an education workshop last fall for his students.

"I liked the aspect that the little deeds they do are not just creating good character for the doll. The hope is that along the way they realize that all these experiences help them build character for themselves.

"They've already realized how it makes them feel to do good things for others, and that it's not just about creating a somebody out of the doll."

Hodgson says that next year he'd like to emphasize projects that don't necessarily involve raising money.

"Acts of kindness can be very simple in nature ... as simple as shovelling your neighbour's driveway or playing games with a senior citizen," he says. "Students begin to learn that small acts of kindness can make a big difference."

Harry Vien and Mike Cernick, for example, organized a school ministicks league.

Nobody is a bit naked now, but by the end of the school year, it will be covered with gadgets and goodies, and the class will have given it a gender and a name.

Because this Nobody is the first one the school has had and is something of a celebrity at Nelles, Hodgson hopes to keep it permanently and acquire a new one for next year.

"This has been a great vehicle for the kids to see and learn about how they can help others," Hodgson says.

"This isn't just talking. This is doing."

To see other Nobodys and the kind of projects that are being done, log on to whoisnobody.com.

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