

SCHOOLS / STUDENTS

Diverse Abilities Awareness Week Furthers Understanding

By SALLY HOGARTY
Editor

Orinda Intermediate School (OIS) once again furtered understanding of both students, parents and faculty/staff at its annual Diverse Abilities Awareness Week (DAAW). Held from February 4 – 8, the week included class discussions about various types of challenges and abilities such as differences in learning styles, auditory processing, visual and sensory integration, and physical impairments.

“Our goal is to have the kids begin to understand what a person might be challenged by and to experience that. It really helps you appreciate what others have to deal with everyday,” says Anna Tague, parent volunteer and DAAW coordinator. Tague, who also cofounded Parents of Orinda Individuals in Special Education (POISE), has a 9-year-old daughter with Phelan McDermid Syndrome – one of about 600 diagnosed cases in the world – caused by a spontaneous deletion of a small segment of her 22nd chromosome. “Nicole is the youngest of our four children, and she is inspired by, and an inspiration for, her older siblings,” says Tague. “Her siblings, and in some ways friends of her siblings, gain an awareness of the challenges life can have by watching Nicole and how hard she works to accomplish things that many never even think about.”

During Diverse Abilities Awareness Week, all OIS students were exposed to numerous activities involving physical challenges and discussed the film *Freedom Machines*, a documentary on assistive technology. The week also included a sixth grade assembly and panel discussion, where three young people shared their experiences and challenges of their world.

“It’s amazing, but each year I learn something new from the panelists,” says Tague. “There are so many resources out there, and we want to increase the aware-

ness for people who might need those resources.” This year’s panelists included Maricor Pagsanjan, who has cerebral palsy and uses an augmentative communication device to communicate. “She is not able to use a typical keyboard due to muscle control challenges so she uses an infrared light on a headband to select ‘keys’ on her computer,” Tague explains. Richie Bennett, a graduate of OIS, returned to the panel for his fifth year. Bennett has had much success as a wheelchair athlete through BORP (Bay Area Outreach Recreation Program), which provides adaptive sports to individuals with physical disabilities. He is currently working on his graduate degree at St. Mary’s College. Laurie Van Allen also returned as a panelist to share details of her life with a guide dog.

A highlight of the week was the community open house on February 6, which included a wheelchair basketball game with OIS 8th graders playing the BORP team in the Isola gymnasium. BORP had to spot the OIS players a large number of points to keep the score somewhat close.

Also at the open house, sixth grade students had an opportunity to experience a variety of visual, auditory and sensory-motor stations. “The sensory-motor station had you look into a mirror and then try and trace something. It was pretty hard,” said 6th-grader Brice Dalton. “I really liked the station where you asked Maricor questions. She answered by moving her head and pointing a laser at her computer screen, and then the computer ‘said’ what she wrote.”

Bridget Tague’s favorite station was the one that required students to put a bunch of Skittles candy in front of their lower teeth, hold them in place, and then read a tongue twister. “It was pretty frustrating trying to be understood,” says the 6th grade student. “The goal of this exercise is for students to acknowledge that a person’s intelligence level can be misunderstood or underestimated if the individual is difficult to understand,” says Anna, Bridget’s mom.



SALLY HOGARTY

OIS 8th grade students play wheelchair basketball against the BORP team. BORP (Bay Area Outreach Recreation Program) provides sporting events for wheelchair athletes.

The groups at this year’s open house included: Autism Family Support Project; Augmentative Communication and Technology Svcs.; BOPR; Communication Works; Canine Companions for Independence; Quest Therapeutic Camp; MaxAbility, occupational therapy services; Special Olympics; Trails to Success, social skills; and Xenophon Therapeutic Riding Center.

“Our principal Michael Randall feels strongly that having activities like this that let students really experience things, helps them learn,” says Tague. “I hope that it also

allows them to share some of those experiences with their parents.”

Dalton, who was attending the open house with his grandfather Al Foley, felt the experience was very valuable. “I think kids really get something out of it. They see what it’s like to not be able to do things a certain way so maybe when they see someone different, they’ll not laugh but help them. I know that some of the stations I went to seemed kind of cool at first because you’re trying to do something in a whole new way. But, if I had to do that everyday, it would get really annoying.”



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OIS students try to draw by looking at an image through a mirror at the sensory-motor coordination station.



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