

# SCHOOLS

## QUICKTIPS

### HOMEWORK HELP

#### My funny Valentines

One Valentine's Day superstition supposes that if a woman sees a robin on Valentine's Day, she will marry a sailor.

If she sees a sparrow, she will marry a poor man and be happy. But if she sees a goldfinch, she'll marry a millionaire. For more traditions while preparing your Valentine's for Wednesday, see [www.arthur.k12.il.us/arthurgs/valtrad.htm](http://www.arthur.k12.il.us/arthurgs/valtrad.htm) or [www.history.com/minisites/valentine/](http://www.history.com/minisites/valentine/)



Wilmette's Joel Berman reaches out to students at Central School Friday, showing them a prosthetic leg. He said he's so used to dealing with his own prosthesis that "it's like putting your shoes on." — Brian O'Mahoney/Staff Photographer

## Students explore disabilities as part of awareness effort

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Mainstreaming of disabled children may work better if everybody involved understood the very real differences between the kids sharing the same school experiences.

That was one of the messages brought to a recent parent-teacher meeting at Wilmette's Central School by James Williams, an 18-year-old with autism.

"Sometimes, solutions for problems that occur in the classroom aren't very hard, but they require the teacher to think ... outside the conventional teaching method," the Northbrook youth said. "It's common when a child misbehaves to have the child sit by himself. However, many children with special needs, especially with social deficits, can't wait to sit by themselves.

"So you're actually telling them to misbehave more."

Many in the audience weren't surprised by that information, testimony to the fact that the school, along with its district, already pays a lot of attention to

15 percent disabled population.

Williams' speech was just part of a Disability Awareness Week in January to take parents, teacher and especially students another step, from tolerance and friendliness to naturalness and friendship.

Awareness Week activities for all of the K-4 students included playing with wheelchairs, sports accessories for amputees and goggles that mimic vision impairment to help show what it's like to face the challenges of a disability. Then, they all listened to a talk by Wilmette resident Joel Berman, who lost a leg in a train accident 21 years ago and now owns Adaptive Adventures, a nonprofit firm that eases "differently abled" people into athletics.

### Leading fulfilling lives

Berman told the kids a disability shouldn't mean opting out of life.

"A lot of people lost arms and legs in the Vietnam War who can ski a whole lot better than I ever did with two legs," he told them.

"Some of the happiest people I know are disabled. They lead

great lives, have great friends—and participate in more sports than most people."

After Berman's talks to Central gym classes, teachers led individual classrooms discussions about what the children had learned, and answered their questions.

"I think they really got it," said Veronique Frede, mother of Hannah, 6, a friendly, outgoing Central School first-grader with autism.

Parents of abled children should know that when their kids have play dates with mates with special needs, they should be prepared to see their friends abruptly wander off, said Frede, a member of a school committee that fostered the awareness week.

That doesn't bother one of Hannah's friends from school much.

"There's a little boy in her classroom since kindergarten that she really likes," she said. "She talks about him all the time."

After Disability Week, "his mom asked me for information on autism. He still had questions." So she gave the mom a



Joel Berman, who heads a nonprofit sports activity firm for people with disabilities, shows students a bicycle that pedals with arm motion. Berman, a Central School graduate who now has a child there, lost his own leg at 21. — Brian O'Mahoney/Staff Photographer

copy of Ellen Sabin's *The Autism Acceptance Book*, which is geared to youngsters.

"It's a great book that explains in simple terms, with very nice graphics, what autism is about," she said.

The same PTO crowd that listened to Williams also heard from Bobbi Goldman, the mother of a 9-year-old boy with

autism who attends Romona School, another district facility.

She told them that kids like hers, who might not be able to stay happy through an entire birthday party, would still like to be invited; they might just want to come for the last half hour, when the cake is cut and the presents accepted.

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# EXPLORE

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## A hidden disability'

"Autism is a hidden disability," she added. "People tend to be more forgiving when they see people with a more obvious disability.

"They may see a child having a meltdown: assumptions are made and sometimes judgments made, and people are judging your ability to parent. We all do that; it's a natural thing to do, but sometimes people need to consider that people have different abilities. Sometimes a child who has autism has an inability to understand and an inability to communicate."

Williams agrees assumptions can be damaging to autistic children and their parents.

"Children with autism perceive things differently," he said. "The truth in a situation is not just in what happened but also in how the person with autism felt it," said Williams, a teaching assistant and author of *Jack Lack*, a comic novel about an 11-year-old autistic boy. Williams also co-authored *The Self-Help Guide for Special Kids and Their Parents*.

"A child (with autism) who believes he was teased should be regarded as being teased even though the child who made the remark did not believe he was teasing."

Ray Lechner, district director of special education, said last week, "Every (district) school handles this a little differently. We allow them to customize their own disability awareness plans."

He said he likes the

way the Central School initiative treats the "disabilities that are not obvious, (such as a) high-functioning autistic, who may appear to be just a little not right, maybe a little strange," and thus might be discounted by peers. "With this program, they may be able to respond to them differently, with more understanding."

Principal Melanie Goffen Horowitz said neither parents, staffers nor children reported any negatives from its first Disability Awareness Week. A committee of parents and staffers are now developing a curriculum for a more formal program for next year, and plan to ask the district's foundation to fund it.

One of the issues the school disability awareness committee will decide is whether to include such relatively mild learning disabilities such as attention-deficit disorder in next year's program. Some parents of children with ADD may view their children's inclusion as a violation of their privacy, she said.

"One of the greatest concerns and needs we have is helping children without learning disabilities learn how to play and interact with kids with disabilities," said Heather Glowacki, assistant principal and special education coordinator at Central School.

"Are we doing this only because we have such a high special ed population at Central? Absolutely not," Horowitz said. "Looking at the big picture — ethnic diversity, religious diversity, racial diversity — education helps you appreciate the real differences between people."