

Tribune Chronicle

Surviving middle school: Local students help performer send message on bullying



Performance artist Robert Post performs his show "How to Survive Middle School" for students at Willard PK-8 school Thursday afternoon. Photo by R. Michael Semple

WARREN — Robert Post encouraged the audience of sixth- and seventh-grade students at Willard PK-8 School to throw “*imagination balls*” into the paper bag he was holding on the cafeteria stage.

The children happily complied, pantomiming throws toward the stage. Post then turned over what had appeared to be an empty bag, and tiny red balls poured out onto the stage as the crowd let out a collective gasp.

Post, 63, has been entertaining audiences of all ages for more than 40 years with a mix of comedy, magic, juggling and performance art. The lanky, limber performer was a regular act at downtown Warren's Opening Night celebrations in the late '80s and early '90s.

His performances at all four PK-8 buildings in Warren on Thursday and Friday were different.

Mixed between the juggling and physical comedy were video interviews with students and teachers about bullying and other serious topics for a show called "*How to Survive Middle School.*" Students and teachers from Willard and Warren G. Harding High School were among those Post interviewed last school year for the project, and the local shows were the first time he's performed it in front of an audience.

"In all humbleness, I've never written anything, created anything like this before," Post said. *"I know I'm funny; I know how to handle an audience; I know what I'm doing on stage. But I've never created anything that can not only touch people, but I want kids to be changed (by it) ... And I also love the fact that it's not me. It's kids talking to kids."*

Joshaway Jackson, 12, a seventh-grade student at Willard was among those Post interviewed for the video. He was looking forward to seeing himself before his large afro was cut off — "*I was just waiting for my big meatball head to appear,*" he said — but he also thought the show could have an impact on students.

"I think it could make them realize it's not just them who's having a problem," Joshaway said. *"It is hard in middle school. You have to*

adapt.”

Amber Opperman, a sixth-grade language arts teacher at Willard who also is featured in the videos, said she thought seeing fellow classmates on screen made the program more meaningful.

“It means a lot to see people they know responding in a serious way,” she said. *“They may see them goofing around in class, but he did a good job of connecting with the students in the interviews.”*

Warren’s involvement in the project was a direct result of the school district being selected by the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts for its Any Given Child initiative, which uses existing arts programs in schools and area arts organizations to integrate the arts into the curriculum for students in kindergarten through eighth grade.

Warren is the smallest of the 23 school districts selected by the Washington, D.C.-based organization and the only one in Ohio.

Because of AGC, Ohio Arts Council Executive Director Donna Collins recommended that Post come to Warren when he was interviewing students, and it’s the reason he returned to Warren to test the concept.

Post, who lives outside of Columbus in Lithopolis, said the idea was born when he was hired to do a workshop on creativity / physical comedy at a school in New Albany.

“I thought to myself, ‘How many times have I done this in my life?’” he said. *“I was just bored. So I said, ‘You know what we’re going to do? We’re going to make a movie instead.’”*

The concept *“How to Survive Middle School”* popped into his head, and that short film was a big hit. A friend who is superintendent encouraged him to expand it into a school show; his agent was less encouraging.

“(He said), ‘Oh my gosh, this could get kind of heavy,’” Post said.
“Yes, it could.”

Post remembered his own struggles in middle school. He had learning disabilities and felt he didn’t fit in, and those problems were amplified when his family moved, and he spent eighth grade in a new school. While many problems are universal, today’s middle schoolers face challenges he couldn’t imagine. Social media adds a new layer to bullying, one that children can’t escape when they leave school.

A principal shared with Post a tweet one of his students received — *“On Friday, the whole school will celebrate when you’re not here because we’ll finally know you had the guts to kill yourself.”* What made it worse is there was no way to trace which student sent the comment.

“That was an eye opener,” Post said. *“A lot of parents don’t realize what is happening, and the parents who do know are really afraid of it, this mental, emotional bombardment that’s coming into some kids because, for one reason or another, they don’t fit in.”*

Post made a point of trying to interview all kinds of students, not only to have a racially diverse mix of boys and girls, but also to cover feature those who are perceived as popular as well as those struggling to find their place.

“I got a nice compliment from a couple teachers at the first school (Lincoln PK-8) — ‘What’s really great is you have such a variety of kids that all the kids can see themselves on that screen.’”

The video also offers some words of encouragement to those middle schoolers by including interviews with students now in high school.

“When the high school kids come in, I wanted it not only to be positive, but real. I mean really real,” he said. *“Getting bullies to open up, getting kids to say it’s not as bad as you think it is. Getting them*

to say not only is high school not as bad as you think it will be, but you'll be really surprised how much better it is."

After the first two performances Thursday, Post already was thinking about changes he wanted to make, taking out a bit about testing and adding more from the interviews with teachers, telling more personal stories about his own struggles with middle school as a transition between the comedy and the videos.

Local fifth-graders will see those changes in the spring, when he returns to do the show for those who will be entering middle school in 2017-18. But Post quoted playwright George S. Kaufman — *"You don't write something; you rewrite something"* — to explain that he sees *"How to Survive Middle School"* as a show that will keep evolving.

"That's what I'm going to continue to do, constantly taping, taping, taping. Filming kids so I have an archive."

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Tribune Chronicle entertainment writer Andy Gray serves on the governing council for Any Given Child in Warren and is doing a series of features on the program over the course of the school year as it is implemented in Warren City Schools.

COMMENTS