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Walker students bring tales of their lives to life

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Abram Katz flashed the victory sign with one hand and put his finger to his pursed lips with the other, the universal grade-school symbols for "pipe down, attention people," and the 23 students in Dylana Garfas-Knowles' fourth/fifth-grade combined class at Walker Elementary Tuesday morning obeyed.

Katz then announced that those interviews they did a few days ago, the ones in which they sat in front of a video camera and talked "about our truths," were turned into a one-minute video which would now be projected on the classroom's big screen for all to see. Enjoy.

There's some fidgeting in the audience as the title screen introducing "Kid Wisdom" faded out to reveal two of their classmates sitting on a couch. Then the truth-telling began.

"Some times really can be hard, but one day you'll come out of it," says a girl with long brown hair. "Talk to someone about it and you'll feel better. And get a dog."

Giggles.

Another girl: "If you see someone that's struggling then you should say hello because that might make their day."

And, finally, one last student, her face filling the frame, looks straight into the camera.

“Don’t change yourself unless you want to do that,” she says, “because you’re you and that’s the best you can be and even if people don’t like that don’t listen to them. Be yourself because you’re awesome.”

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The one-minute video, says Katz, represents only a sliver of what’s to come of the students’ work once they’ve completed his six-week community grant-funded narrative storytelling unit. Its purpose, explains Garfas-Knowles, is “connecting the students’ social-emotional realities to the writing process.”

The students from both Garfas-Knowles’ class and Jennifer Parks’ fourth-grade class have been meeting two to four times a week since Sept. 13 to finish the unit, which was scheduled to wrap up Thursday. On Tuesday, Garfas-Knowles’ students were hard at work finishing their stories. Each sat before sheets of paper — their story maps or drafts of their stories, which included topics ranging from serious to silly and everything in between.

Some of the students chose to work alone, but most of the desks were pushed together in clusters of two to six. In one such cluster, Makayla Moore and Sahalie Matsdorf, both fifth-graders, shared their final drafts with each other and considered any last-minute edits. Both said they have enjoyed the class.

“I like it because you get to write and that’s one of my favorite subjects,” Moore said.

For Moore, deciding what to write about was easy.

“I like animals,” she said. “I have goats, chickens, and we get pigs every year. We do 4-H with them. I wrote about my goat, Gabby.”

Matsdorf chose a more edgy subject, one that’s made headlines recently both locally and nationally.

“I wrote about my fear of clowns, but it’s a fantasy,” she said. “I made up the story but it’s a real fear. Before I knew about (clown sightings), I just thought clowns were creepy.”

Katz is the program director for Organizing New Teaching Approaches in School Communities, or ONTASC, and a teaching consultant for Southern Oregon University. He’s taught a digital storytelling course at SOU for the past

three years, helped Talent Middle School develop and implement curriculum for early English learners and special needs students and his website, **ONTASC.com**, includes a list of 13 different programs he's either developed or is in the process of developing.

Also on his website is a password-protected link to 16 student movies, the results of similar storytelling classes at a middle school. Subjects in that one ranged from a student's passion for drawing to another's struggles with bullies. The voice-overs, like Walker's, are handled by the students themselves, who narrate their own stories.

Katz said the storytelling unit at Walker isn't the same as the middle school version, but the results are similar in many ways.

"It's definitely different than middle school," he said. "But how deep do they get? As much of an opportunity they are given is how deep they go. And when we say deep, it's still at grade level. A lot of them haven't hit puberty so there isn't that swirling and twirling but there's still plenty of home stuff, social-emotional stuff. It's all there, it's just in the frame of elementary school kids."

Garfas-Knowles agreed.

"I think kids at this age are actually pretty open to sharing their emotions," she said. "In middle school you might have to dig a little bit deeper, but these guys will just share. It's amazing how honest they are about their feelings."

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