

St. Luke partners with community leaders in literacy initiative

SPECIAL TO THE INDEPENDENT

While local students have not been able to go on field trips or have visitors to the school, two Barrhaven teachers in the Ottawa Catholic School Board (OCSB) set out on a mission to make the school year a memorable one for their grade three students.

A joint venture, dubbed the "Family & Friends Read Alouds Series" was born. Colleen Coxall and Angelo Bruno, grade three teaching partners at St. Luke Catholic Elementary School in Barrhaven, created the virtual read aloud and guest speaker series to ignite a love of reading, introduce students to a wide variety of professions and develop an understanding of the importance of sharing one's talents in their community.

Initially, Coxall and Bruno reached out to parents and colleagues in their school and within their school board. Parents were among the first virtual guest speakers and readers. For many parents, accustomed to volunteering in the schools in a variety of capacities, and now relegated to sitting on the COVID-19 sidelines, the opportunity to read virtually in their child's classrooms was well-received.

Next up were school administrators and OCSB superintendent, Ben Vallati, and Director of Education, Tom D'Amico. They

were followed by Barrhaven Councillor Jan Harder, Liberal MP for Nepean, Chandra Arya, and Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson.

"The addition of these guest readers has not only been an exciting experience for our students, but a valuable one as well," cited Coxall. "Through the sharing of their life and career experiences, our guest readers have shared with us information about potential careers for our students as well as shared their passions for causes close to their hearts such as celebrating cultural diversity, encouraging girls in sport, the importance of physical and mental health, building community and the list goes on."

Nearly 30 guests have shared their time, talents and personal stories with the two classes. The stories that the guests choose to read often reflect the message that they hope to impart on the students... stories of opportunity, hope, community, resilience, perseverance, acceptance, determination and respect for one another.

One of the most memorable read alouds was delivered by Barrhaven's own Ottawa Police Constable, Josh Cavicchioli. Constable Josh is the Police Services School Resource Officer (SRO) and is assigned to several of the Barrhaven elementary and high schools. Cavicchioli delivered his remote read

aloud, on location from his police cruiser, just outside of St. Luke School. Even more impressive, his shared story, "GoodKids P.I. Super-Kid Sleuths," was actually written by Constable Josh!

Ettore Lattanzio, delivered some powerful messages, comparable perhaps to his own off-the-chart strength. A frequent volunteer at a St. Luke children's sports camp, Lattanzio, a Grey Cup champion with the Ottawa Redblacks, inspired the students to reach their potential. Lattanzio, who was Bruno's former student, returned to St. Luke to a hero's celebration in 2016 when he brought the Grey Cup to the students and staff of his elementary school.

A noted underdog throughout much of his CFL playing career, Lattanzio spoke about overcoming a variety of challenges in his life, academic, physical and personal, to reach his own goals. Grit and perseverance were central themes in Lattanzio's discussion with his young and adoring fans.

"Persistence is probably a theme that I would like to teach the kids," remarked Lattanzio. "To not give up when things get too hard and that setting attainable goals can help in the pursuit of their dreams."

In referencing Lattanzio's engaging talk, St. Luke student Nathanael Woldemichael echoed those sentiments. "The most important message or lesson I got from the presentation was to keep chasing my dreams, to not give up and to keep practising until I achieve my dreams."

Barrhaven media personality Ian Mendes, a senior writer with The Athletic, and formerly with TSN 1200 Radio and Sportsnet, discussed the power of sports and how it has the potential to be a unifying force in our world. A veteran Nepean Ravens Ringette coach, Mendes spoke about how

students, parents and educators should reassess their priorities on what success looks like.

"My hope is that all children feel comfortable in the skin they're born with," Mendes said. "That includes their gender, sexuality, race, etc. I would love for children to feel confident and comfortable with who they are. Being comfortable in your own skin is the best definition of success."

He also led a discussion on the necessity of youth having heroes that look like today's youngsters, ones that they can identify with. "I also wanted to make sure I touched on the importance of empowering young girls in sports."

Eight-year-old Liliana Howse, took Mendes' message to heart. "One of the lasting impressions on me was Mr. Mendes' women in sports presentation. When I was four or five years old, I thought girls could not play soccer, baseball or basketball because only boys could play those sports. I'm going to start soccer sometime next year and I'm not doing it to get famous. I'm doing it to have fun, to make friends and to be a part of a team."

Life lessons through participation in sports and encouraging young girls to pursue their athletic dreams were common threads in the Family and Friends ser-



Ottawa Police Constable Josh Cavicchioli, the Police Services School Resource Officer (SRO) for Barrhaven elementary and high schools, shared his story, "GoodKids P.I. Super-Kid Sleuths."

ies. Canadian Olympic and World Hockey team gold medalist Katie Weatherston and World 100m Hurdles Champion and Olympian, Perdita Felicien, definitely continued the youth and girls empowerment dialogue.

Coxall noted, "Perdita encouraged us to be fearless, to face the hurdles in our lives whatever they might be and welcome them as events that can stretch us, help us to grow and make us stronger and better for having met those hurdles head on. Winning doesn't have to be finishing first. It can mean being proud of what you accomplished in that race of life, picking yourself up and trying again."

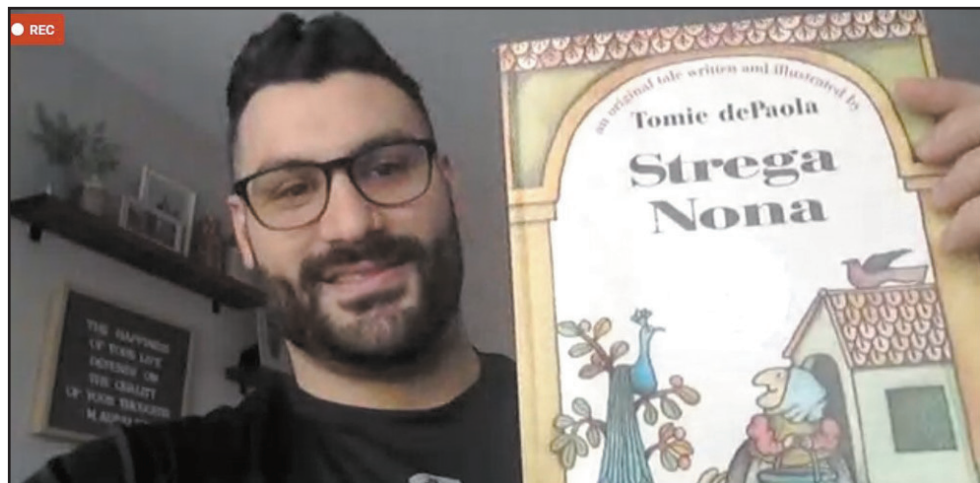
Perdita reminded us that making perseverance, determination and acceptance part of our daily routine can make you stronger - what a remarkable message and example of growth mindset for our students!"

The message of having a growth mindset was echoed thoughtfully by student Peyton Siu. "The way that I will try to live a better life from these presentations is if I fail, I will try again and never give up on anything. If I do give up, I will never live a good life. When I have failed I will take those lessons and use them to grow and learn."

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Perdita Felicien shows her Olympic gold medal to the St. Luke third grade students.



Former Ottawa Redblack Grey Cup champion Ettore Lattanzio, a St. Luke graduate, talked about perseverance and determination to his old school's third graders.

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Hardly a day goes by during our current pandemic malaise, without a conversation about increased concern over the mental health and the well being of children. Author, Bell Let's Talk Mental Health Advocate and Recipient of the Mayor's City Builder Award, Chris Nihmey led a very engaging and powerful exchange on this very topic.

"Often, I wanted to throw in the towel," offered Nihmey. "Severe

illness will do that to anyone. However, I learned something so valuable in my journey emerging from the depths of illness, and I share this message with all whom I speak with. It was true. I was not alone. You are not alone. It is my hope for every child that they realize that they are never alone. When we realize this, when we know that this is true, we find the courage to speak up and receive care. Hope emerges and healing, in whatever way it is need-

ed, begins to happen."

Nihmey's message really resonated with student Julia Malcolm. "One way that I will try to live life differently or positively is through Mr. Nihmey's message. His message was, do not be afraid to tell anyone if you are having trouble with something or if you are really struggling. That was a great message to me."

Isabella Lima added, "To me, the most memorable presenter was Mr. Chris Nihmey because he shared

the story of his life and all the difficulties he had. He overcame them by telling someone and he asked for help. Now he writes books for other people to show them how he overcame his difficulties and for people to also learn how to overcome their own difficulties."

The OCSB has implemented a mindset that includes the motto, "Be Community." The Family and Friends Read Alouds initiative is a great example of a partnership with the community that strives to build healthy relationships while supporting student achievement and well-being. If you or someone you know is interested in participating in the St. Luke Family and Friends Read Alouds initiative, please contact: angelo.bruno@ocsb.ca



Chris Nihmey talked to the students about the importance of mental health.



Barrhaven media personality Ian Mendes talked to the St. Luke students about inclusion and diversity.

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