

Building acceptance and breaking barriers is priority for student leaders



Adam Barry has experienced the impact words can have on a person firsthand. People might give the impression on being kind face to face, but once you turn the other way, it can be a different story altogether, says the Grade 12 student at St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic High School.

One instance which particularly sticks out in his mind was his pushing through a group of Grade 9 and 10 students in the hallways of the school.

"The first thing I heard was "Who the F was that f--," says Adam. "I just turned around, but my friend was like, "Are you serious right now?" She stood up. There are so many people who are here for you and it is almost like they were put in this world for you, just like we're all here for one special reason. It really impacted me to see a really good friend step up like that."

Since then, Adam has been taking a lead within the school, stepping up to foster a feeling of equality and acceptance in his school environment both for the LGBTQ community and beyond.

He was one of four student leaders recognized by the school for their efforts, in a special presentation to wrap up Black History Month.

Throughout February, students at St. Max were tasked with studying the speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., from his iconic "I Have a Dream" speech, to some of his lesser known, but no less poignant messages, of an equal and unified society.

"Black History Month is really about confronting the attitudes within ourselves and each other that contribute towards discrimination," said Michael Nasello, Superintendent of Education, at Thursday's presentation. "These are attitudes and beliefs that say I am better than you, or you and I are not equal, or my background of being white or privileged, or being physically able, takes precedence over your background of being African, Asian, European, poor or challenged. In short, discrimination happens; any time I think I am better than you because you are not like me. If it is not obvious, I will say it: the problem in this attitude is clearly with me and not with you."

This was a sentiment shared by Adam and his fellow honourees Faith Izzard, Oliveigha Gauthier-Moulton, and Cara Torraville.

For Oliveigha, it is important to realise people aren't always going to be nice to each other, but in order to affect change, you have to be that change.

"You can't fight negativity with more negativity; you have to show love to everyone and show that love so they can feel it."

A Grade 12 student, she has demonstrated this philosophy in a number of ways throughout her four years in high school, including

helping to found the school's Equality Club to aid the LGBTQ community, and taking this message out into the school environment. This sense was heightened when she was in Grade 11 while walking on Wellington Street outside the school. She says she heard one Grade 9 yell a particular three letter gay slur to another.

?I realised how blunt it is and how people don't really care who hears it,? she recalls. ?He is not in the privacy of his own home. He is not hanging out with one of his friends, and that is not acceptable either. In that moment, I realised how harsh it is and that is what led me to become more involved in this. That was a big moment in my life.?

Adds Adam: ?It is all about just listening in the hallways and really keeping your eyes open, not just in the school, but the community itself. You see it often enough in social media. It becomes very blunt and open. When you hear a lot of negativity it starts to affect you even if it is not especially to your face. When I see it or hear it, it is not even my problem but it becomes my problem. It doesn't even have to be directed to me because it just affects me. If I hear it in the hallway, it affects me. You notice that issue and you want to make that change, and you just want to correct it.?