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# Learning Empathy by Looking Beyond Disabilities

By WINNIE HU JUNE 21, 2011

RIDGEWOOD, N.J. — Students at Ridgewood High School were shown photos of young people with genetic disorders — muscular dystrophy, albinism, port-wine stains — and told not to look away.

Then, those studying philosophy wrote essays about the meaning of beauty. A ninth-grade biology class went beyond textbook definitions of Turner and Marfan syndromes, communicating with real people to see how they lived with their symptoms. And a dance class created a piece about people with disabilities, in which dancers broke away one by one to perform in isolation.

“It was kind of shocking, because you felt yourself judging right away,” said Madison Konner, 18, a senior in the philosophy and dance classes. “You say, ‘There’s a boy with a funny face, ha ha.’ But you find out later he can’t help it.”

The unusual lessons are part of a new effort, called the Pearls Project, to promote tolerance and empathy in a school culture where being different can mean social exile. Ridgewood teachers developed it this year in partnership with Positive Exposure, a nonprofit group in New York City founded by Rick Guidotti, a fashion photographer.

Mr. Guidotti, who has photographed supermodels like Cindy Crawford and Claudia Schiffer, began snapping pictures of children with genetic disorders in 1997. A year later, Life magazine published his photo essay on albinism, titled “Redefining Beauty.” His work with these subjects has also been displayed in galleries, medical schools and children’s hospitals, as well as at Harvard University and at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History.

For the Pearls Project, Mr. Guidotti photographed 11 young people, each with a

different disability. He also arranged for them to blog about their experiences and answer questions from the Ridgewood students. The subjects are identified only by their first names — Byron, Ashley, Rebecca, et al. — and come from various states.

“Genetic conditions are depicted as images of sickness and sorrow — it’s always a kid up against the wall in a doctor’s office,” Mr. Guidotti said. “The idea was to bring these gorgeous kids into a community that didn’t know them and create a more inclusive society. It’s our responsibility to steady our gaze to see beauty, and not look away because we’re told not to stare.”

This fall, the project will expand to at least five more high schools across the country, Mr. Guidotti said, underwritten by \$130,000 from a fund-raiser hosted last month by Ralph Rucci, a fashion designer, and Ian Falconer, author of the popular children’s series “Olivia.”

The principal of Ridgewood High, John A. Lorenz, says the project teaches important lessons about tolerance as schools face an increase in bullying and serve more special-education students than ever. The 1,700-student high school started a separate special-education program in 2008 for students who were once sent out of district; it now serves 18 people. There is also a club that works with children with genetic and behavioral disorders to put on musical theater shows.

“This is what real learning is about,” Mr. Lorenz said. “It’s relevant, it’s meaningful and it’s fun. Not one student said, ‘I wish I didn’t have to do this.’”

Teachers created assignments requiring students to get to know the Pearls subjects — read their blogs, watch their videos — and to put themselves in their places. The students were encouraged to ask questions, which their teachers passed along via e-mail.

Amanda Muccio, 15, a ninth grader in a biology class, said she asked Ashley, also 15, whether she was embarrassed to meet boys because she had muscular dystrophy and used a wheelchair. Ashley replied no, that if boys saw only the wheelchair, that was their problem. “I’m so happy for her that she can be so confident in herself,” Amanda said. “I envy that.”

In philosophy class, students used the Pearls photos to start a full-scale discourse on what Kant, Hume and Nietzsche, among others, thought of beauty, then wrote papers about what they had learned. “The challenge in a class like philosophy is not so much the material but getting them to carry it into their lives,” said Patrick Bernardo, the teacher. “This was a natural fit. Almost from the beginning, they saw the relevance.”

Creative-writing students who had signed up to write about their own feelings found themselves trying to write poetry about strangers. “It kind of took me awhile to get into it,” acknowledged Tony Boniello, a senior. “Maybe subconsciously I didn’t want to give writing about someone else a chance.”

Then Tony started reading the musings of Rebecca, 21, a college student with arthrogryposis multiplex congenita, a rare condition that can cause joints to be stiff and crooked. He fashioned a poem out of the sights that she found most beautiful: a sunset, the ocean, dolphins, a rainbow, a person who takes time to interact with someone with a disability.

“I think it’s important to get out of your comfort zone,” Tony said. “There’s only so much you can learn about yourself.”

A version of this article appears in print on June 22, 2011, on page A18 of the New York edition with the headline: Learning Empathy by Looking Beyond Disabilities.