

NEWS

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Student's strong messageBY JUAN ANTONIO LIZAMA
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

Jan 27, 2006



Third-grader Christopher Oliver put up a fight to stay home from school yesterday morning.

He felt fine, except for the stage fright he felt over the attention he would receive at his Cool Spring Elementary School in Hanover County for winning the grand prize in this year's national No Name-Calling Week Expression Contest.

He was nervous about going on stage to receive his prize from children's book author James Howe, facing the flashing cameras and peering eyes from an assembly of visitors, other third-graders and teachers.

Christopher Oliver went over his award-winning poster with children's book author James Howe yesterday. Oliver won the grand prize in this year's national No Name-Calling Week Expression Contest.

JOE MAHONEY/TIMES-DISPATCH

"He just doesn't like the attention," said Christopher's father, Tommy Oliver, a financial analyst with the State Corporation Commission. "He was very uncomfortable with the whole thing."

Christopher beat out more than 1,300 students from across the country, ranging in ages from 8 to 18. In its third year, the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing and No Name-Calling Week Coalition of more than 40 national education organizations asked students to submit essays, poetry, music, artwork or other creative expressions that conveyed experiences and feelings about name-calling and bullying in their schools. No Name Calling Week began Monday and ends today.

The project seeks to draw attention to name-calling, a form of bullying, in schools and to provide tools to educators and students to initiate dialogue to eliminate the problem.

Nearly one in six -- or 3.2 million public and private school students are bullied each year and 3.7 million are bullies, according to a 2003 study by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, a nonprofit, anti-crime organization of law-enforcement agencies, prosecutors and victims of violence.

Christopher said he has never been called names in school, nor has he done so to others.

His entry in the competition was an art piece with the words "gAY," "StUPid," and "frEAK" scattered about a face shape cut from a newspaper page. At the bottom of the artwork, he pasted his message: "JUnKy wordS BelOnG in the traSh can."

At yesterday's awards ceremony he sat on the floor of the cafeteria in the front row with other students, frequently turning to look at his parents who were using a video camera to record the event. Other family members were also in the audience.

Brooke Wiese, education director of the No Name-Calling Week project, said judges were impressed with Christopher's art and the strong message it carried to discourage the use of hurtful words, she

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said.

"We felt this message is exactly what No Name-Calling Week is about," she said.

With those remarks Wiese invited Christopher to come up to the stage to claim his prize of a \$150 check and certificate of recognition.

An agile Christopher climbed onto the stage without bothering with the stairs. He quietly thanked Howe, who presented him with the prize.

Once the ceremony was over, Christopher ran back to his parents and embraced his father around the waist, burying his head to shy away from the throng of people congratulating him, asking questions and trying to snatch him to pose for pictures.

"With all this attention brought down on him, he shuts down," said Christopher's mother, Cathy Oliver, adding that he is usually the loudest around people he knows.

Oliver, a free-lance graphic designer, said her son doesn't have an affinity for art like his sister, Emily Oliver, a sixth-grader at Chickahominy Middle School. He did this project as homework for his art teacher, she said. This is his first art contest, she said.

"He is very good at playing the piano," she said. "That's more of his creative outlet."

Another part of Christopher's reward for winning was that Howe came to Cool Spring to read to the third grade students.

Howe's book "The Misfits" -- a book about a group of middle school friends who create a party for a student council election to defend students who have been called names--inspired No Name-Calling Week.

Contact staff writer Juan Antonio Lizama at jlizama@timesdispatch.com or (804) 649-6513.

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Reader's Reaction

Posted on 01/28 at 07:52 AM

Why is the public school system sponsoring this event? Since when does the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network have the right to co-sponsor any event in the public schools. The message is not of bullying, but allowing Homosexuality to undermine the children who are too young to understand this moral issue. I am opposed to my tax dollars being used for such events.

Gordon

Posted on 01/27 at 08:30 PM

I admire this young child. I truly think that No Name Calling Week is just as important as Say No to Drugs theme. We can't always be with our children 24/7, so at least they have some idea of what to do, who to go to when craziness of bullying happens. Christopher is a very intelligent child. Having small programs like this is educational for all the children as well as adults. This is a great opportunity to stop the violence now. Children need to know that they are important too!

DD

Posted on 01/27 at 08:30 PM

Parents should teach their kids manners. It all starts at home! morals & values ** Then again I see far too many Rude adults with no manners. How are the kids supposed to learn. As usual the schools have to pick up the slack for the lazy parents!

lynratterree

Posted on 01/27 at 08:30 PM

Way to go. It is about time that bullying gets the national attention it should. I have a son who was bullied all through middle school and the school did absolutely nothing. He missed a lot of time from his classes and all the school administration did was to threaten to take us to juvenile court for his absenteeism. Something needs to change. This is not "kids being kids". It is a life changing situation.

tax tech 2006

Posted on 01/27 at 02:59 PM

It is very refreshing to read about such a wonderful and special little boy. One who is compassionate, creative and bright. What a gift he must be to his parents. Parents who have obviously done a wonderful job raising their son. - Atlanta, GA.

JAB

Posted on 01/27 at 02:59 PM

This is the silliest, most ridiculous thing I have ever heard of. The next poliically-correct goofiness they'll come up with is National Take The Trash Out Because It Smells Bad Week. No wonder our kids don't learn anything. We've doubled the average expenditures per student (in real dollars, adjusted for inflation) over the last 30 years, and there's been no real improvement in test scores. STOP THE MADNESS!!!! EXPEL THE LOSERS AND TEACH! How difficult is that to understand?

Jim M.

Posted on 01/27 at 12:56 PM

Good for Christopher. Bullying used to be taken way too lightly, 'oh just kids being kids', but in reality it scars people for life - to some extent or other. My favorite saying is, "There's no right way to do a wrong thing." And there isn't. I think good behavior should start at the very earliest age.

Larry Lanberg

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