

Raising Esteem in Students

by Kevin Crush
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A teenage boy jumped up from the couch in his classroom and stood in front of his fellow students to speak. "At the beginning of the year, I'd probably be afraid to stand up and talk to the class like this," he said, bursting with smiles.

In the course of less than a school year, something changed in the 18 students that form this class at Salisbury Composite high school. Maybe they had teenage angst at the beginning of the school year. It's hard to say. But to their own admission, last September they were not the most confident group of kids, and that can leave a person at a disadvantage at school and at life. Fortunately, their teacher, Lindy Mair, had bumped into Matt Thorpe one day and they began talking about kids.

Thorpe, by the way, has extensive knowledge with social problems. He travels to small communities and helps them set up youth justice programs; he works with prison inmates to help them overcome personal problems; and a few years back he orchestrated a stop bullying program on Vancouver Island which gained national attention when the former bullies travelled to other provinces to spread their message.

Mair believed he could help do something for these kids and brought him in last fall as a guest speaker. He didn't leave. Over the course of the year, Thorpe kept returning to work with the class.

Sitting in a circle of couches in the school's Heritage Room, he's been building up their confidence by encouraging them to speak their minds and feelings. It's best to build up that self-esteem while they're still young, says Thorpe. "This is actually where it starts. They've got to get the self-esteem and confidence in their life grounded now and hang on to it. Because if not that's when all hell breaks loose later on."

The students, of whom the school has requested anonymity, responded to the chance to talk. "It's more easy to bond with other people now," said one student. "It's shown us how much we can grow as a community," said another. Even their teacher has seen the change in them and believes they're ready to take on the world now. "They'll be better able to handle situations that they come across. I think they'll be more confident. They'll be able to face situations ... the idea of self-honesty and taking responsibility in any situation," said Mair.

The kids credit their transformation to Thorpe. "It's hard to find someone who will sit down and talk with us," said one of the teens, while another says Thorpe really wants to hear what they have to say while never judging them.

On the flip side, Thorpe gives full credit to the kids for making the change. "Those kids are awesome," he said, calling them tomorrow's future leaders. If more kids were to be given the sort of attention they had in this class, there could be fewer teen problems. "It all has to do with purpose, meaning, self-esteem, confidence and also community support. And that's what that class is – community support big time," said Thorpe.