

DEL MAR TIMES

Skyline opens students' minds to various walks of life

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By Jonathan Horn

Jason Gackstetter is an All-American boy.

The Solana Pacific sixth grader is talkative, friendly and loves sports. However, Jason suffers from Cerebral Palsy, a condition that severely limits motor abilities and keeps him in a wheelchair. Jason is guided with the help of his service dog, Marisa.

"We actually do a presentation every year when Jason starts school," said his mother, Nancy. "People don't really know what to do with this kid in the wheelchair, and lots of times they just end up ignoring him. So if they know he's the guy with the really cool dog that can do all this stuff, they'll come up and ask him, and once they start asking, he's a very social, friendly boy, and he'll start talking about sports, and kids just learn that it's okay to interact."

With Jason and Marisa by her side, Nancy Gackstetter gave a lunchtime presentation to the students of Skyline Elementary in Solana Beach. It was part of the school's first ever Disability Awareness Celebration, which introduced all 400 students to various conditions that effect people in all walks of life.

"I find our kids are super respectful and kind," said Skyline counselor Jill Damaso. "With inclusion sometimes it's a little bit of a challenge, but I feel like our kids are wonderful, and just with kind of easing maybe some of their fears and anxieties, I feel like we can make this campus more accepting. It already is, but kind of increasing that."

Skyline students went through obstacle courses on wheelchairs, tried to paint using either their non-dominant hand or a foot, and interacted with therapy dogs, which are trained to give humans positive, warm feedback when addressed.

"I think it's a good idea just telling kids that it's okay to be different. It's okay to do what you want to do," said fifth grader Travis Sneed, adding he especially enjoyed the therapy dogs. "It was just kind of cool."

Skyline is one of the few public schools in San Diego County that goes from kindergarten through sixth grade, the year most middle schools start. It also has a program for severely handicapped students.

"I really wanted (our general education students) to learn about a lot of things, like putting the person before the disability, about accessibility, and about different disabilities," Damaso said. "What I hope the kids learn is first of all that it's okay to ask questions. I hope they learn to feel more comfortable with the people around them, and to appreciate and respect others' abilities."

After the lunchtime presentation, it was back to school for everyone, including Jason Gackstetter.

"He's just making a guest appearance here," Nancy said, adding that a goal of the visit was to leave the Skyline students with a more open perspective. "I hope they can understand that just because somebody has a physical or apparent disability, they're not that different. They're regular people. They have the same desires and hopes as everybody else."



Skyline elementary students try to paint with their feet as part of disability awareness day.
Photo: Jonathan Horn

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