

Children use drama to take on racism in Burnaby



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Anti-Semitism in the Toronto area. -

Xenophobia, cyber-bullying, racism — they're all

issues faced regularly by students in schools.

But Jodi Derkson is doing her part to put a stop to that by getting kids at Byrne Creek Community school in Burnaby involved in active learning, script writing and drama aimed at stamping out discrimination.

Derkson is the B.C. director of educational programs for Fighting Antisemitism Together (FAST), a group that works to empower students to take action against all forms of discrimination. She is working with English teacher Pamela Smith's Grade 10 class on a presentation written and presented by students that explores topics designed to empower people with the tools and knowledge to speak out.

"I believe in experiential education. I know that's how I learn best," Derkson said. "In order for kids to change, they need to feel. If they get the experience of acting out as someone who is oppressed, or even as the oppressor, hopefully that experience will be transformational."

Voices into Action is a program created by FAST that is available free to teachers. It includes online materials that meet curricular goals, as well as testimonial videos and other resources. Although the organization started as a response to anti-Semitism, it now tackles all types of discrimination, including Islamophobia, Japanese internment during the Second World War and LGBTQ issues.

Derkson, a former drama teacher, adapted the program into Voices into Acting, which uses the same ideas, but translates it into an interactive performance. During the show, one pair of students acts out a job interview involving a young person with Asperger's syndrome. In other skits, students talk about cyber-bullying, human rights, xenophobia and discrimination.

Student Umamah Mokarram, 15, says taking part in the program, Voices into Acting, has been fun.

"It has been pretty exciting for me. I've never been in acting before," says Mokarram, who moved to Canada from Bangladesh. "The topic is really important."

Mokarram said she personally has never experienced racism before, but she is Muslim and wears a hijab, and says she has heard stories about discrimination against people she knows.

“It hurts me because they are hurting my people,” Mokarram said. “This program helps because it spreads awareness.”

Smith said working on the program with her students gave her a chance to see students shine in different roles, including acting, public speaking and writing the scripts.

Byrne Creek school is in Burnaby, near the border with New Westminster. More than half of the students at the school aren't Canadian citizens and two-thirds don't speak English at home. There are more than 60 languages spoken by students at the secondary school.

Derkson has plans to take the program into other Metro Vancouver-area school districts, including Maple Ridge and Surrey.

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