



# Symposium cultivates students' skills



Jen Zettel, USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin

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APPLETON - When Mary Simonis attended Fox Valley Lutheran High School, she didn't realize what her strengths were.

It was only after she spent six years in the military, went to college and came back to the Fox Cities that she realized how she could make a difference in the world.

Her message to more than 300 freshmen on Tuesday was to figure out their strengths and weaknesses now, and build on them.

"We get so stuck on ... learning everything about everyone else that we forget to actually learn things about ourselves," she said. "If you never truly know and see how great you are, you will never truly know the difference you can make."

Simonis' talk was part of the 2016 Teen Symposium held at the Radisson Paper Valley Hotel, and sponsored by United Way Fox Cities and the YMCA of the Fox Cities.

The annual event brings students from 19 area high schools together to focus on ways they can be leaders in their schools and communities. This year's theme was, "Be Your Own HERO: Honest, Empathy, Respect, Open-Mind."

Simonis, who is branch director of the downtown Appleton Boys & Girls Club and speaks to students nationwide through her company Resilient Redhead, said students can make a difference by simply smiling and saying hello to their classmates.

She showed a video about a student named Josh Yandt who was bullied after his father died. His family moved, and when he started at a new high school, Yandt started holding doors open for other students, earning him the nickname, "The Doorman."

An act that seemed small created a ripple effect, and changed the culture at Yandt's school.

Fox Cities students picked up on that.

"Everyone has talents and you can use those to be a hero," said Nevaeh LaVoie, a Neenah High School freshman.

They also appreciated that the program didn't just tell them what to do, but showed them by emphasizing self-empowerment and confidence.

"I really like how they were trying to build us up as leaders instead of just telling us we're leaders," said Macy Wydeven, a freshman at Menasha High School.

Each school could bring up to 20 students to the symposium. It's an opportunity for them to network with their peers across the region, which helps them look beyond the bubbles of their

own lives, said Kelly Jansen, a math resource teacher and freshman class adviser at Kimberly High School.

The freshmen enjoyed meeting new people, too. John Pagel of Neenah High School and Chelsea Franke of Menasha High School both said it was one of their favorite things about the event.

When Kimberly High School educators decide who to invite, they look for students who lead by example, Jansen said. They also purposely select students who participate in a wide array of activities.

"We look for kids not necessarily who are so swamped with activities, but who show that potential and that quiet leadership," she said. "Our hope is that when they get back to Kimberly High School, they go out and use these core values and concepts in the events that they choose.

"If each one of our kids — and we brought 20 kids — impacts another 10 to 15 kids, there's that exponential growth," she said.

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