

Program aims to inspire youths to tend their ears

Listen up. Upper school pupils at Palm Beach Day School want everyone to hear an important message. Concerts and loud music coming through headsets can damage the inner workings of the ear, eventually leading to hearing loss.



Thomas Skiffington was one of a half dozen pupils who had a basic hearing screening Friday at the Hearing Wellness Center of the Deaf Service Center of Palm Beach County.

He and his classmates are part of Kids Hearing Kids, a public service campaign coordinated by Kathlyn Maguire, president and founder of Empowerment Through Hearing. She is launching the national public service message initiative for all ages through the Hearing Wellness Center.

The 15-year-old from Wellington was able to discern the range of frequencies administered by certified audiologist Debra Shadoff.

He was a little surprised to learn his pastime of singing and playing guitar in a local band, The North End, could cause him some problems in the future.

"After I play, my ears feel full," he said. "I go to a lot of concerts. Sometimes I get a little bit of a headache."

He and his classmates left the West Palm Beach center with information and decibel-reducing earplugs.

"It is so important to let the youth know (hearing loss) is not just for seniors," said Joan Gindlesperger, executive director of the Deaf Service Center. "They don't understand how what they do now can impact them later.

"Hearing loss is slow, painless and irreversible," she said.

The entire student body will benefit from the knowledge the upper school has gained.

At 8 a.m. Thursday, pupils in all grades will view a 60-second message on the school's bi-weekly Day School News closed-circuit television program. The ad was produced over a three-month period by upper-grade pupils who regularly work and learn in the studio as part of their school curriculum.

It cites a hearing loss statistic of 14 percent among children ages 10-15, making the point that the affliction is not just about "grandma and grandpa."

The one-minute message compares hearing loss to vision problems requiring glasses or contact lenses, and crooked teeth being straightened with braces. Pupils are told hearing loss is preventable, and if and when it does occur, it should not be a source of shame.

It will be a prelude during Thursday's in-school broadcast to a live interview with Maguire. She experienced some hearing loss at a young age, yet was able to make her way through a public relations career. Colleagues helped her function in a business setting of meetings, phone calls and committee work. Looking back, she said their well-intentioned help enabled her to delay seeking a real solution.

Hearing aids were useful to a point. But Maguire got the relief she needed in 2001 through a cochlear implant at the University of Miami.

Her experience prompted her to initiate the Kids Hearing Kids program, letting children know hearing health is important and hearing loss can be prevented in large part by protecting their ears while they are young.

"They need to understand that the smart choice is to turn down the sound," she said.

By Margie Kacoha

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