

The U.G.L.Y. side of bullying

Former 'American Idol' contestant gives Bridgman students advice on bullying

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BRIDGMAN - Devyn Rush remembers what it was like to be bullied. In her early teens, she was one of the kids who didn't want to go to school and would fake being sick just so she could leave early.

That's why the former "American Idol" contestant spoke to Bridgman students Wednesday morning and afternoon on behalf of Hey U.G.L.Y. - Unique Gifted Lovable You, a nonprofit organization that focuses on bullying and suicide prevention.

As part of her "I Am Enough" Bully Prevention Tour, Rush gave students a few tips on dealing with bullies. With October being National Bullying Prevention Month, F.C. Reed Middle School students were the first to hear from the singer/songwriter Wednesday.

The assembly began with a short introduction about Rush, which included a short clip of her audition for American Idol. In the video, Rush wowed the show's judges - Jennifer Lopez, Steven Tyler and Randy Jackson - with her singing ability, but got a lukewarm response on her appearance.

"I got to Hollywood, and the day I dressed the way I thought the judges wanted me to dress, that's the day I got cut (from the competition)," Rush said. "I didn't hear the other part of what they said. That I need to believe in myself."

Standing before one of the younger crowds she spoke to Wednesday, Rush sang two songs she wrote about her experiences with bullying and how she overcame it. She then asked students to talk about instances in which they felt bullied.

Rush hit a number of topics with students, including self bullying, negative judgments, being a bystander and not passing the "bullying ball" onto another person. She even made students participate in an exercise to squish all the negative judgments they have ever made toward someone else between their fingers, before replacing them with positive thoughts.

Ellie Kroeze, who attends the sixth grade at F.C. Reed Middle School, had good seats for the assembly and said she plans on using the squish exercise in the future.

"It was amazing," she said. "My favorite part was when she sang because it just blew me away. In her audition I didn't think she would sing that good."

Fifth-grader Tanner Peters didn't know what to expect when he was told he was going to an anti-bullying assembly.



What caught his attention was how sometimes bullies at school are the ones being picked on at home.

"I thought it was really powerful when she was speaking about other stories about people getting bullied," Peters said. "I liked how she was talking about that guy getting kicked and how it turned out to be his best friend and that things like that can change people."

Rush, who lives in California when she is not touring as a Hey U.G.L.Y. spokeswoman,

started speaking at schools four years ago when she was eliminated from "American Idol" in 2011.

She said one of the main reasons she got involved with the anti-bullying movement was not only because of her experiences. Her older sister began speaking at assemblies like these and encouraged Rush to make a difference.

"Everyone needs a positive outlet for when your 'self' can't find your 'esteem,'" she said. "I want students to walk away with knowing they have a choice. A lot of times when we're in pain we feel like we don't have a choice. I've been there and pretty much everyone in the world has been there. We can learn how to love ourselves through making positive choices."

Rush will give another presentation Thursday, only this time for Bridgman High School students. For more information on the nonprofit or to learn new ways of dealing with bullying, visit <http://www.heyugly.org/>.