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Project Happiness: Happiness is a Skill Teens Can Learn

By Sophie Braccini



Randy Taran Photo provided

Middle School Dean Kim Parks, of Saklan School in Moraga, wants students to be happy - not only because she cares on a personal level, but because when they aren't happy, they can't work very well. Looking for resources in this area, Parks met producer, director and co-author Randy Taran who created "Project Happiness," which offers tools and curriculum to help kids discover lasting happiness starting from within. For the past two years Parks has incorporated Taran's findings and tested her curriculum at Saklan.

"There is an epidemic of stress, every teacher has to deal with it," says Taran in an interview with Microsoft's Daily Edventures, "but there are ways for each student to be better equipped to access the happiness I feel we were born with."

According to Taran, studies show that 50 percent of happiness is a genetic trait, but 40 percent comes from intentional activities and thoughts. "Happiness is a skill set that can be practiced," she says.

The mother of a teenage daughter who had difficulty dealing with school and social stress, Taran looked for tools to help her, but only found resources for adults and college students, nothing for middle and high school kids. Through Project Happiness, she says young people have a chance to look within, to find what their strengths are, tap into those, learn compassionate communication and learn conflict resolution.

At Saklan, Parks has been using the Project Happiness tools and curriculum with the eighth grade leadership class. "The approach is very hands-on and pro-active," says Parks. "The first weeks we start by discussing long term happiness. At first the students speak about playing games or going to parties, but we dig deeper to find what they think will be lasting in their lives." The leadership class works on other aspects, such as the boomerang effect--how what we do affects others and comes back to us--or 'monkey thoughts,' the negative self-talk.

the students also apply the values we've explored with younger grades and choose a community service project that has meaning for them."

On October 11, Taran will present the project that started it all: an award-winning documentary showing the quest of three groups of kids, one from California, another from Tibet and a third from Nigeria, all looking for what it means to be happy and the skills that can be developed to increase happiness. The documentary records the quest of the students who interviewed people all over the world, from the Dalai Lama to George Lucas, Richard Gere to neuroscientist Richard Davidson, about the nature of lasting happiness. They also engaged in discussions and kept journals.

"They came out of that journey better equipped to own their skills and to access their happiness," says Taran.

After the movie, Parks and Taran will discuss ways to incorporate Project Happiness findings into the school curriculum and into the home. The free presentation will begin at 6 p.m. October 11 at the Holy Trinity Serbian Church, 1700 School Street in Moraga. For more information, visit www.projecthappiness.org/community/events/.

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