

Parenting tips offered by founder of Youth Wellness Network

By Bill Rea

People in the Herb Campbell Public School community recently received some advice recently on dealing with mental illness.

Numerous agencies were represented at the Child and Family Mental Wellness event.

The keynote address was delivered by Michael Eisen, founder of the Youth Wellness Network.

His talk was an inspirational one, in which he described the struggles he had to go through in his youth. It's a message he delivers to schools all over North America.

Eisen said he was described as a spirited child when he was two years old. "I came into this life questioning everything and listening to nothing," he said.

He recalled his father was a dominant man, with his mother representing the source of love. Most of his childhood was spent with the feeling that no one understood him. "Why can't my way be right?" he wondered as a child.

Eisen said he ended up developing insecurities and feelings that he didn't belong. While he was in elementary school, he was bullied and picked on. In Grade 8, his few friends turned the rest of the class against him, and he wondered what he had done to deserve that.

"That year, by far, was the worst year of my life," he said.

Eisen said he went to high school hoping for a fresh start, but first he had to recreate a new identity for himself to undo the identity his peers had already created for him.

The result, Eisen said, was he was scared of the opinions and judgement of others, worrying about what others would say if he said or did anything.

He eventually gave up, became depressed, and by Grade 11, he would be spending most of his time watching movies on TV. He didn't feel he could talk to his parents, and two older siblings wanted nothing to do with him.

"I couldn't talk to anybody," he said. "I held in everything I was feeling."

The only creature Eisen could openly talk to was the family dog, a poodle named Brandy, and he provided a place where he could let it out.

"They're hard wired to love and understand," he said, adding the dog helped him get out of Grade 11.

In Grade 12, Eisen got the idea that he could be happy if he was successful, so he put a lot of pressure on himself to get good grades, and his health suffered as a result, with stomach problems. "I made myself sick every single day," he said.

He continued to work hard, making himself sicker in the process, but he was eventually accepted at McGill University.

He saw that as a chance for a fresh start, since no one at McGill knew who he was. But he also found that he thrived in the social situations at university, and forgot to study. He ended up almost failing a couple of courses and feeling guilt as a result.

"I started feeling guilty for having fun," he said.

In second year, he put more pressure on himself to improve his grades, working harder. But when he got into exams, he would panic if he saw a question he didn't know the answer to. In that state, he said he would lose everything he had gained from cramming.

Eisen said that was the first time that hard work had not brought success. He started feeling worthless, depressed and useless, and in the first semester of his second year, he had a breakdown.

His father showed up, but he wasn't able to be much help. Eisen knew him to be a control freak and a workaholic. He was driven by money and power, and all he wanted by 50 was success, significance and accomplishment. But his father didn't have happiness, and was having health issues too.

Eisen said his father started wondering what he was accomplishing with his life, until he read *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari* by Robin Sharma. That book changed him, teaching him different ways to see life. He said his father soon turned himself around, with his health problems sorting themselves out. He was happy with who he was, and decided to become a life coach.

Returning home for the holidays, Eisen said he saw a completely different man in his father, who related what he had learned and the inspiration he had gained at being able to turn his life around at 50, so Eisen figured he should be able to do it at 19.

After six months of coaching from his father, Eisen found his depression was gone, as well as the stomach pains.

"For the first time in my life, I was completely happy," he said, adding he became so inspired that he figured if he could do it, anyone could.

Eisen came up with the idea of the Youth Wellness Network. It was set up to provide young people with the help he wished had been around when he was young and needed it.

He now goes to speak at any school that will have him, trying to have kids avoid the struggles he had.

Eisen also had some strategies to offer the parents in the audience.

The root cause of challenges is people don't love themselves enough, he said. They believe self esteem comes from how others view them, and not how they see themselves.

"We are all looking outside of ourselves for the solution, but the solution exists inside ourselves," he observed.

He added the more kids hear about what they can't do, the more they look outside themselves for what they should do.

"We give our power away to those people who are letting us," he said.

Young people in Grades 7, 8 and 9 look to their peers for acceptance because they have a desire to be validated.

Eisen said that when people look outside to fill themselves, they never get full. The reality is that self esteem and worth comes from within.

"We all know how to do that," he said. "We've just forgotten."

"When you give to yourself, your cup actually becomes more full," he added.

He also said parents have to look out for their kids, having been told that giving is the right thing to do. But they are not taught how to receive, or to give to themselves so they will have more to give to others.

"The reality is you can't give what you don't have," he commented, adding people can't care for others if they don't care for themselves. "What service are we providing if we give from an empty tank?"

Eisen stressed the need for parents to take the time every day to fill themselves up so they will be able to gi



Michael Eisen of the Youth Wellness Network addressed people attending the event.



Avis Svezikas-McKercal, access and intake specialist, and Garth Buckley, clinical coordinator for the concurrent disorders program, were handing out information on Peel Children's Centre.



The recent Child and Family Mental Wellness event included some martial arts demonstrations. Racheael Ragbirsingh and Mateya Stebbalj-Wood of the Academy of Martial Arts in Brampton were putting on this demonstration of Bo basics.

ve to their kids.