

Friends of Rachel are making OTHS a better place

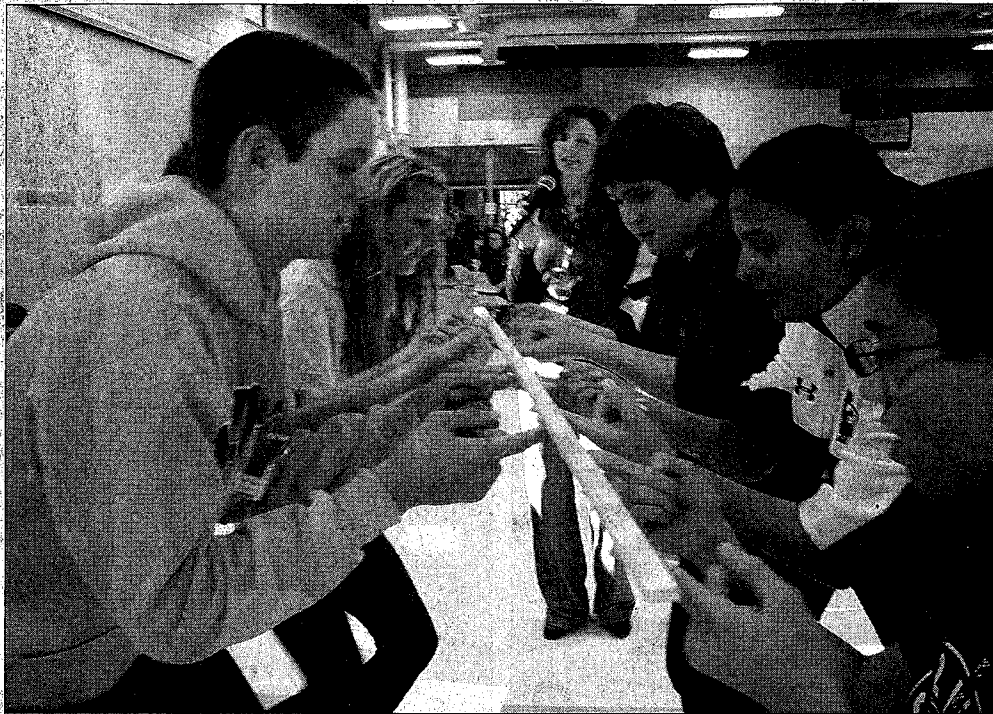
By Mark Raeber
PROGRESS STAFF WRITER

O'Fallon Township High School administrators say their campuses are kinder and gentler places thanks to a national program called Rachel's Challenge that is teaching students when they begin on the freshman campus to treat others with care and compassion.

The program is named for Rachel Scott, who was the first person killed in the Columbine tragedy on April 20, 1999. She left behind a challenge to anyone willing to accept it: "Treat others with kindness and compassion and you just may change the world you live in."

Her acts of kindness and compassion coupled with the contents of her six diaries are the foundation for the Rachel's Challenge program, which was introduced on the Milburn campus in 2010. Its objectives for schools include:

- Create a safe learning environment for all students by reestablishing civility and delivering proactive antidotes to school violence and bullying;
 - Improve academic achievement by engaging students' hearts, heads and hands in the learning process;
 - Provide students with social/emotional education that is both color blind and culturally relevant; and
 - Train adults to inspire, equip and empower students to affect permanent positive change.
- "It is a program geared toward getting kids to think about how they treat others and to work toward creating a more positive environment at the school. It is all about being proactive," OTHS Social Worker Mara



Courtesy photo

Team-building exercises such as the one shown here are used as part of the Rachel's Challenge program to teach OTHS freshman about getting to know people before making assumptions about them.

Koerkenmeier explained. "We are teaching the students about treating others with care and compassion and about reaching out to others and not prejudging people, and about getting to know people before making assumptions about them," she said. "Rachel thought she would live a long life. And she had rules she thought people should live by," Twana Dollison, vice principal on the freshman campus, noted. "Her philosophy was to spread kindness and to create a chain reaction. And that is what our kids are being taught to do, to start a chain reaction by spreading kindness." Freshmen Sarah Duffy, Angela Carrico and

Katelyn Cornell, who are members of the executive committee of the school's Friends of Rachel (FOR) club, said they became involved because they wanted to help more people. "I was inspired by Rachel's work — how she met new people and made them feel wanted at the school," Duffy said. "I really liked how she inspired kids in what to do and how her message travels on and teaches us how to act toward others," said Carrico. Cornell added, "I admire how she did her best to welcome those who were feeling left out. The first of her priorities was to make sure those who are being

bullied were not feeling bad. She had the important rule to be kind to everyone. And I wanted to be part of something that could do that in our own school." All of the girls said they have witnessed bullying during their past schooling. But they said they have not seen as much bullying at the Milburn campus. And they credited FOR as one big reason for that. "A large percentage of our kids have accepted Rachel's challenge," Dollison said. "And it is not a program they see just one time. We are constantly doing things that keep the message alive and remind the kids to do the right things." Dollison then said the

administration hopes to spread the Rachel's Challenge program throughout the high school and a FOR club was organized on the Smiley campus when last year's freshman became this year's sophomores. She noted the goals of Rachel's Challenge have also been shared with other OTHS clubs and organizations and said, "The more we get it out to the different groups, the wider it will spread."

The club's executive committee members also have been trained to spread the message to their freshman classmates. Each month they visit classrooms on the Milburn campus to present information and lead discussion on topics relevant to the challenges, such as being kind, respecting others and serving the community.

The club also carries out community service projects throughout the school year. A canned food drive in the fall gathered more than 850 items for the O'Fallon Food Pantry. Dollison said the Rachel's Challenge program has also been successful at improving discipline at OTHS.

"It has impacted a lot of kids who are all aware of what to do and what the expectations are," she said. "And it gives us common language when discussing things," she said. "You can't assume everyone knows how to act but, because everyone has seen the presentations, we can say would Rachel do this. Then they can think back and reflect if this is something Rachel would do." For more information on the Rachel's Challenge program, check out its web site at www.rachelschallenge.org. If you have questions about the program at OTHS, contact Koerkenmeier at koerkenmeierm@oths.k12.il.us or Dollison at dollison@oths.k12.il.us.

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