

Haven revives career day program, connecting classes to careers

As a circus performer, her scariest trick involved jumping on a trampoline, flipping into the air and landing on top of someone's shoulders — someone who was standing on top of two other people.

"I wasn't naturally good," Sylvia Hernandez-Distasi said Haven Middle School students as students watched her on video, pivoting effortlessly through the air to land atop a stack of people. "I had to work really hard to get to that point."

Hernandez-Distasi, who co-founded the Evanston circus school Actor's Gymnasium, was one of more than 50 professionals who spoke to students April 2 during Haven Middle School's Career Day. Many professions were represented, including pilot, actuary, product designer, lawyer, doctor, sports editor, electrical engineer, airport consultant and firefighter.

"It's important for them to see all the different opportunities that are out there," said Haven Principal Kathy Roberson.

Haven has held Career Days in the past, but not for several years, according to Roberson. When they realized it had been a while, staffers started talking about bringing the program back, and the school formed a steering committee of four to organize the program.

Bringing Career Day back also ties in with the Evanston Cradle to Career Initiative, explained committee member and school librarian Amy Odwurka. A partnership between District 65 and District 202, the initiative is designed to prepare students not just for college but also for careers, especially those students who do not go on to a four-year college after high school.

Odwurka said the steering committee began reaching out to parents last fall, and then one person after another got in touch, connecting them to professionals who wanted to help. Participants lined up to thank her in the school library following the event, and she said the feedback from kids has also been very good.

"The kids were so excited about jobs they knew nothing about," Odwurka said.

Career Day did not just open kids' minds to a world of opportunities, but it also let kids what skills they use in class are relevant to the careers they might choose, she added.

Pilot Kevin Lubic, who flies for Japan-based All Nippon Airways, said he mostly fielded questions about what it's like to sit in an airplane for so many hours, and what it's like to travel the world. But he also talked to kids about how he was using subjects they study, like math and science — as well as art.

When he was in school, Lubic enjoyed woodshop and ceramics, and said being a pilot involves similar artistry, as pilots use their minds to project their flight path onto the world. Within a certain set of rules, he explained, pilots have some freedom to choose their own path — and employ artistry — as they approach an airport.

"There's a sandbox you can play in," said Lubic, who has a sixth-grade son at Haven, as well as a daughter in fifth grade.

Although Career Day lasted for just a few short hours last week, students will continue discussing what they learned in different classes throughout the next few weeks, according to Odwurka.

“For many of the kids, this will be a springboard,” she said.

As the bell rang to dismiss kids for lunch following the presentations, several Haven students said they found the speakers informative and even inspiring.

Eighth-grader Caitlin Strickland, for example, heard a Skype presentation from actress Lauren Lapkus who appears in the Netflix series “Orange is the New Black.” Strickland already wanted to go into the performing arts, but said she took away some good advice from Lapkus, who advised students to pursue their interests through extracurricular activities.

Strickland does sports now, but said she wants to try to get into more extracurricular performing arts groups.

Fellow eighth-grader Zach Volpe, who wants to be a veterinarian, remembered the advice of the sports editor

“He told us you should always stay on task and push yourself,” Volpe said.

After hearing from a sales manager (“which was the best”), a doctor and a lawyer, eighth-grader Anika Blitzstein said she had a clearer idea of what career path she wanted to follow.

“Now I don’t want to be a lawyer anymore,” Blitzstein said, explaining that the lawyer who spoke seemed not to like her job.

Instead, Blitzstein said she wants to become a doctor, like her parents.

Ald. Jane Grover, who participated in Career Day, said she learned as much from the students as they seemed to have learned from the speakers. Speaking to students, she conducted an informal poll on whether the city should ban spitting in public (votes were split down the middle) and collected a wish list of things students would like the city to do.

On that list were more protected bike lanes, more reliable CTA buses and fitness equipment like weights and machines in the rec center.

“Great ideas,” Grover said. “I think we’ve got to reach out more to the students.”

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