



Cathryn Scott/Paper Press

Sean Stephenson speaks to students at Barrington Middle School — Station Campus about the importance of believing in yourself no matter how big the obstacle.

# A lesson in positive thinking

## Small man a big believer in self-confidence

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STAFF WRITER

According to Sean Stephenson, seeing is not believing. Instead, believing is seeing. Stephenson, who has a condition called osteogenesis imperfecta, reached his full height at 3 feet and travels by wheelchair. But while limited in stature, his positive self-image and outlook make him seem larger than life.

"I don't see someone in a wheelchair. I don't see someone tiny. When I look in the mirror, I see Tom Cruise!" he told Barrington Middle School — Station Campus students during an all-school assembly last week.

His positive attitude has helped him overcome obstacles, which have included inconsiderate remarks from others and more than 200 fractures and broken bones. He tried to impart the same positive outlook on his audience.

"It's important to be in control of what you believe," he said.

"When I go wheeling down the street, people make all kinds of assumptions about me," he said. "I believe I have a beautiful life. You can't assume when you see people going through challenges that they don't like their life."

Stephenson, now 24, recalled the painful experience of breaking a femur when he was in elementary

school. His complaints about life being unfair were interrupted by a mother, who asked, "Is this going to be a gift or a burden in your life?"

His decision to adopt an optimistic outlook would change his life and impact thousands of others, with whom he has shared his vision.

"Everybody has to deal with fractures, breaks in their life. Everybody in here has some sort of pain they have to get through," he said.

With social pressures, teasing and other factors, he acknowledged middle school can be difficult to handle.

"No one likes to feel weird. No one likes to feel different. We like to look in the mirror and like what we see. Unfortunately, many of us don't," he said. "What we think about ourselves makes all the difference. A thought has no power over us until we believe it."

Stephenson asked his audience to echo his philosophy with the words "I believe I'm strong," "I believe I'm confident" and "I believe I'm worthy," which they repeated in unison.

He emphasized that it's up to each person to decide whether a situation will positively or negatively impact his or her life.

"All life is a series of situations that I interpret the meaning of," he said.

Still, people need to respect others and act kindly to them as well as to

themselves, he said.

### Message hits home

Stephenson's message hit home with many students and staff members at Station Campus.

"I thought his speech was awesome. I think every child from grade school to college should listen to him," said Donna Ballentine, special services aide.

"I was really surprised to see as many kids as he touched," she added.

As students left the assembly, many stopped to thank Stephenson or request his autograph.

"I think he touched all the kids here because he was down-to-earth," eighth-grader Joey Luna said.

Luna said Stephenson taught him how to relate to classmates with disabilities.

"It gives me more courage to ask kids if they have problems," he said.

Brendan Kelleher, also an eighth-grader, said he could relate to Stephenson's stories because he sees kids teased at his school.

"People making fun of other people, people hitting people, stuff like that," he said.

Some students said they expected a more respectful atmosphere to result from Stephenson's visit.

"People will think about what they do before they actually do it," eighth-grader Cameron Magee said.

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