

# Kids told to 'bounce out the stigma'

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Mike Simmel has epilepsy.  
The same Mike Simmel plays  
basketball with the Harlem Wiz-  
ards.

When he recently addressed the children at the Mackay School about his personal experience with epilepsy and his commitment to help "bounce out the stigma" often borne by children with special needs, the third, fourth and fifth

graders listened.

The day of his visit, Simmel, of Allendale, formed a no-bully squad of fourth graders at Mackay and he plans to follow up on this no-bullying squad.

His talk really opened up a

forum, said Archondia Condos-Dulot, a Mackay School parent who arranged for Simmel to speak as part of the school's Chemical Awareness Program. "Fifty children lined up to ask Simmel about his epilepsy," she said. "That's how poignant his speech was."

Simmel's philosophy is "to guide and inspire children to pursue big dreams rather than allowing others to predetermine what they can achieve."

Simmel has epilepsy, a neurological condition that affects the nervous system, resulting in seizures that temporarily impair brain function. When he was a 16-year-old attending basketball camp, he was asked to leave after he suffered a grand mal seizure. His father, Bill Simmel, refused to take his son out of the camp.

"The camp was afraid that I would sue if anything happened to my son, and I told them that I would sue if they didn't allow my son to remain at the basketball camp."

At that time, young Simmel was playing varsity basketball at Don Bosco Prep and he went on to play college ball at Purchase College. Today, he plays pro ball with the Harlem Wizards and serves as national spokesperson for the Epilepsy Awareness for the National Epilepsy Foundation.

Simmel is also spokesperson with Eisai Inc., a pharmaceutical company based in Teaneck.

Because there is a great deal of misinformation, myth and stigma association with epilepsy, Simmel welcomes all opportunities to help educate the public, especially children.

Following Simmel's talk at Mackay, those elementary students may be way ahead of most young people's understanding of epilepsy.

According to a recent Epilepsy Foundation survey of 19,000 teenagers, only 22 percent were not sure if the condition was contagious and another 23 percent did not know enough about the condition to know one way or another.

Eric Hargis, president of the Epilepsy Foundation, stated on its Web site that the survey results showed "teens that lacked information about epilepsy engaged in behaviors that were stigma-producing."

All of the negativity associated with the condition can lead to social isolation. People living with the condition have a great fear of having a seizure.

Simmel told Mackay students that the best way to approach persons with epilepsy is with compassion and understanding. This disease is no different from diabetes, asthma, having allergies or other medical conditions.

The Epilepsy Foundation wants the public to know that people with epilepsy are not mentally handicapped and that people with epilepsy should never be called "epileptics." Epilepsy is just one trait. Persons with epilepsy are exactly that — a person with epilepsy.

Basketball has become a medium for me," said Simmel. "I want children to use sports, music or art as a way to develop confidence and self-awareness to achieve their personal goals. Use basketball, art, music, you can empower yourself; that is our message. We want special needs children to empower themselves to go beyond and bounce these stigmas out of one child at a time so the child doesn't feel the stigma of juvenile diabetes, Down syndrome or epilepsy.

"My vision is to show kids what is possible, all the while inspiring them to overcome obstacles. Each new success today creates a more positive vision for a child's future."

Simmel founded the Bounce Out the Stigma for his motivational speaking program for schools and youth organizations.

This summer he is launching the Mighty Mike Basketball Camp in Ho-Ho-Kus for children with special needs, ages 9 to 16.

"It will be a fun camp," he said. "Children will be able to do things that they have never done before. It will be a non-competitive environment with no score keeping. At camp, sports trainers and medical experts will be available to speak with parents about their child's personal athletic goals."

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PHOTO COURTESY OF MIKE SIMMEL

Mike Simmel, a member of the Harlem Wizards, spoke to kids at Mackay School last week. He encouraged the students to overcome obstacles as he has. Simmel has epilepsy, a neurological condition that affects the nervous system.