

Athlete's life motto inspires students

Written by Darci Tomky

"It's a choice. I wear this bracelet because it is my choice" to finish strong, Sharon Jones explained to her students last week. The Holyoke Elementary School counselor took the opportunity to share a powerful story with kids in grades 4-6—a motivational story that reveals just why she wears her black "Finish Strong" bracelet every day.

Before moving to Holyoke, Jones was friends with the Schlichtemeier family in Ogallala, Neb., including Garrett Schlichtemeier (a.k.a. Slick), a 2009 graduate of Ogallala High School.

Sports were a huge part of Schlichtemeier's life, growing up watching football games under Friday night lights as the ball boy for his dad's varsity football team. He made a practice arena in his living room and continued to push himself to be a great athlete.

"Live Strong, Finish Strong" was Schlichtemeier's motto, both academically and athletically, something that got him scholarships to Chadron State College in both areas.

"Throughout his life, Garrett always pushed himself to be the best," said his father on the Finish Strong website. "He strived to uphold ideals of excellence not only in the classroom but in the athletic arena as well." His dedication, sacrifice and commitment raised the bar to a completely new level, and Schlichtemeier achieved his goal of becoming the complete student/athlete.

As the ultimate teammate, Schlichtemeier was always about who he could make better instead of what he could achieve, said his dad. "He led by example and made many personal sacrifices in order for the team and, sometimes, individuals to experience success."

Jones challenged the students to live strong and finish strong as they enter the last quarter of the school year. That means giving 100 percent effort on their standardized tests this week. That means always doing their best and making good choices so they don't have regrets. That means being an "upstander" against things like bullying instead of just being a bystander.

"On the football field, coaches considered Slick a 'Ball Hawk' for having the knack of always

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being around the ball and making plays,” said his dad, “but he was also a ‘Life Hawk’ in terms of making the most of every minute of his life.”

As a 19-year-old freshman on the Chadron State football team, Schlichtemeier and some buddies took a road trip to Alabama for spring break in 2010. That’s when his parents got the call that they had lost their son as a result of severe head injuries sustained in a vehicle accident.

“They lost Garrett that day, but you know Garrett’s story wasn’t over,” said Jones. “Garrett finished life strong—he saved six lives through the gift of his organs.”

His lungs went to a 64-year-old man and his heart to a 21-year-old man. A 5-year-old girl received one kidney while the other kidney and his pancreas went to a 34-year-old female. His small bowel went to a 27-year-old single mother of three and his liver to a 62-year-old male.

Because of a small choice he made when he was 16, the little red heart on Schlichtemeier’s driver’s license allowed him to positively affect six people’s lives. The fact that a physical part of him is living on has been very comforting to the family.

Since Schlichtemeier’s death, the family and communities that knew him have been celebrating his life and have been encouraging others to finish strong just like he did.

Instead of taking his death and doing nothing, said Jones, they took his motto and made it their own motto.

Once again showing students her “Finish Strong” bracelet, Jones encouraged them to make the choice to adopt a live strong attitude and finish the school year strong.

March 8 was the anniversary of Schlichtemeier’s death, and with the TCAP testing this week and a long stretch of school before summer break, Jones thought this was the perfect time to

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spread her message of finishing strong.

For more information and stories about living the finish strong attitude, visit www.finishstrong.com

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