

Daily Item, The (Lynn, MA)
Belmonte students get 'Hooked on Facebook'
SAUGUS

Chris Stevens THE DAILY ITEM

Published: April 15, 2010

It is no wonder that Josh Gunderson had an easy time connecting to students at the Belmonte Middle School with his "Hooked on Facebook" presentation - he fit right in. Wearing green Chuck Taylors and baggy jeans Gunderson, an award-winning director and speaker in his mid 20's, could almost blend into the crowd. His topical jokes didn't hurt either.

But his message was clear and the kids seemed to hear it - social networking can be a risky business.

Gunderson is a one-man show of angst and energy, stories and statistics backed by a laptop, a big screen and a lot of knowledge on the fascination as well as the pitfalls of social networking.

In his hour-long presentation the Salem State grad touched on gaming, texting, sexting, Facebook, the information students reveal about themselves without realizing it and how their online lives should be like a red carpet event, hard to get into.

Gunderson is quick to tell students he's not going to tell them to stop doing any one particular thing because he knows exactly what will happen.

"My mother told me not to get a tattoo," he said, flashing his forearms. "I have seven - take that mom." But he did ask students to flash forward, to think about what they are posting or texting or even when doing something as simple as choosing a screen name.

"Hottiebabe" or "nyc_ pimp" probably won't look good on a resume, he warned.

Gunderson cautioned against sarcasm, which he noted often doesn't translate well online or in text messages.

He talked about Phoebe Prince, the South Hadley 15 year old who hung herself as a result of intense bullying both in and out of cyberspace. Quiet exclamations and quizzical looks were exchanged among many students when Gunderson told them the whole issue started over an invitation to a dance.

"Doesn't that sound ridiculous?" he asked.

He also told the story of five student athletes who created a fake and unfavorable Facebook page about their coach. The kids were not only expelled when they were eventually caught, they all lost college scholarships as well.

"They ruined the rest of their lives," he said. "Do a flash forward every time you're online.

Really, really think about, 'should I do this?'" He also warned students not to become bullies themselves.

He pointed out that the students who bullied Phoebe Prince are now in fact being bullied, which is also uncool.

"Help stop bullying," he said.

To do that Gunderson advised students to simply ignore a bully.

"If you don't respond it takes away their power and if it takes away their power they don't win," he said.

He also advised students not to retaliate, save any evidence, block bullies by unfriending them or blocking them on Facebook pages or cell phones, talk to an adult and perhaps most important - don't be a bystander.

"I would do anything for my friends," he said. "If you have a friend that is being bullied and is too afraid to say anything say something for them. If you don't you're just as guilty as the bully." Gunderson also challenged students - and teachers - to clean out their friends lists, lighten up on posting personal information and think very, very, very carefully about what they share and with whom.

A couple of 14 and 15 year old girls took racy pictures of themselves and sent them to a boy they liked, Gunderson told the crowd. The boy's phone gotten taken away on an unrelated issue and the photographs were discovered.

"The girls were charged with manufacturing child pornography and the boy was charged with receiving pornography and all are now registered sex offenders," he said amid a smattering of giggles. "Yeah, you can laugh but their futures are ruined, they've been taken away." Gunderson reiterated that he wasn't going to tell the kids what to do, he just wanted to remind them of the tools they have to put in their toolbox of life.

"Ignore and block cyberbullies. You are powerful, you are awesome and don't let anyone tell you any different," he said.

"Create a good screen name and email. Protect your privacy and keep it locked up. Make it hard to walk the red carpet that is your life don't give people a 24/ 7 pass to your life."