

Falcon Fest inspires students to open their hearts, share feelings, heal and connect with others

By Karen Billing 8 a.m. Nov. 13, 2015



Torrey Pines Foundation's Shelley Stevenson and Bobbi Karlson with Falcon Fest leader Don Collins and Falcon Fest student leaders. Courtesy photo

Falcon Fest returned to Torrey Pines High School for a second year Nov. 2-5. In the words of the students who went through it, the day was: phenomenal, powerful, real, revealing, encouraging, healing, challenging and inspiring.

The day is a way to release stress and anxiety, providing a safe place for kids to air their problems. Led by Peer Assistant Listeners (PALS) program advisor Don Collins, kids get a chance to make deep connections with themselves and others and that sense of connection makes for a better school.

“It’s about opening up your heart and changing the campus and making it a friendlier place,” Collins said, touching on the Falcon Fest theme of “open wings, open mind, open heart.”

For several years, Torrey Pines had Challenge Days presented by facilitators from Challenge Day, a company based out of Concord. Administrators had been looking for a way to produce the event on their own and Collins got the nod last year.

Collins said the “x factor” this year was counseling intern Natalie Crook, who helped get the program ready when Collins lost planning time because of the death of his father three weeks ago. A photo of his parents was on display at the event, and his mother was there to watch her son at work.

“Natalie was willing to step up without knowing anything about the program. She totally knocked it out of the park,” Collins said of Crook, who is pursuing her master’s degree in school counseling at University of San Diego. “She showed great skills with the kids, and they really responded to her honesty.”

Collins said Falcon Fest would also not be possible without the support of the Torrey Pines High School Foundation, Foundation Executive Director Bobbi Karlson, board member and parent volunteer coordinator Shelley Stevenson, Principal David Jaffe and the TPHS staff, San Dieguito Union School District Superintendent Rick Schmitt and parent volunteer “flight leaders.”

“It’s an incredible event and an amazing thing to see so many people come together on behalf of our kids,” Karlson said. “Another great reason to be a proud Torrey Pines Falcon.”

Over the course of four days, 400 students went through the experience, discussing issues in small family groups, dispensing numerous hugs, listening respectfully and learning about each other.

“This day has been important,” said one student. “It’s helped me realize that I’m not alone, that there are boys and girls going through the same thing.”

One of the most meaningful activities the students participate in is “Crossing the Line.” The facilitator reads aloud a situation, and if it applies to a student, he or she crosses the line.

Students crossed over when they had been judged for their bodies, whether because they were considered too big or too small. Many crossed for being teased about their clothes, or for wearing glasses or having braces.

When students — and parents — crossed for being hurt or judged because of the color of their skin, those on the other side sent messages of love and support through hand signals.

Nearly everyone crossed when asked whether they had ever felt alone or lonely, and more than half the group crossed when asked whether they had dealt with divorce.

One parent leader, who was divorced, said her family group talked a lot about their struggles with divorce. She said no parents wanted their children to end up on the other side of that line.

Four students bravely crossed when the facilitator asked whether anyone had ever been homeless.

“Today made me realize that I wasn’t the only one who experiences this situation; it opened my eyes that there are people who will stand by you,” said one of the students who has been homeless. “I want to thank Mr. Collins for showing me that.”

Many grew very emotional when crossing to show they had dealt with substance abuse, mental illness or loss of a close family member.

Collins said he was impressed by the courage, honesty and respect the students showed during the powerful exercise. He told the students that when they experience a hardship, they could choose to get stuck in the pain or choose happiness, to accept help and give help.

“Kids need to hear this as they are developing their skills for living well so they don’t end up leaking their pain out each day in depression, aggression, or addiction,” he said.

Collins said the hope for the day is to raise the awareness and to help each person decide to make a choice to be positive and kind rather than harsh or mean.

“I think when you do things like this, sharing your fears and insecurities, it’s amazing how close you can get to people,” said one senior. “I want to take these ideas to the rest of the campus.”

“I learned to be more tolerant of people,” said one sophomore. “You can make snap judgments about people when you’re actually pretty ignorant as to who they are. This experience has made me courageous and taught me to respect more people that I don’t know.”



Falcon Fest leaders Natalie Crook and Don Collins. Courtesy photo

At the end of the session, the students were asked to write a thank-you note to someone who had been a hero in their lives. One student, a junior who was new to the school from Chicago, wrote his letter to his father, who served as a volunteer leader for Falcon Fest.

“I love being your son; you’re a great father, no matter what,” he read to his dad.

Needless to say, Kleenex could have easily sponsored Falcon Fest for the amount of tears dropped over these kinds of touching moments, prompted by opened hearts and minds.

“I’ve heard from some people that we shouldn’t spend the time and effort to put on this, because the effects don’t last. Well, neither does taking a shower or brushing your teeth,” Collins said.

“More importantly, kids are walking around carrying all types of hurt and pain. Many of them have never expressed it or recognized how it impacts their treatment of themselves and others. They don’t see how it impacts their ability to focus, to perform or to be happy. Falcon Fest is a chance to have a lot of fun and connect in a way that is truly transformative.”

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