

Armonk Woman Overcomes Life's Challenges

Addresses Students on Diversity, Respect and Acceptance

By Janie Rosman

Anything is possible when you set your mind to it. That was the message Geri Mariano provided students at Wampus Elementary School in Armonk last week.

Enthusiastic, energetic and direct, Mariano spoke to Mona Goodman's and Janet Thompson's fifth-grade classes about determination, respect and what it's like to be physically challenged.

"One of my favorite things to do is talk to kids, especially 3- and 4-year-olds," she told the two classes during her Dec. 2 visit. "I ask them if they've ever seen anyone like me, and they say no. It's good for them to be honest," Mariano said.

Born with diastrophic dysplasia—physical deformities of the arms, hands, legs and feet—the 42-year-old Mariano was adopted and welcomed into the loving home of Doris and Bill Mariano and their daughters Joanne, Beth and Andrea when she was 17 months old.

She has traveled to several states to speak with students and recently returned from Florida, where she visited family and spoke at her niece's and nephew's school.

"I don't want you to feel sad for me or feel sorry for me," Mariano told students. "Do I look like I'm sad?" Heads nodded no. "Do I look like I'm mean?" More horizontal head-shaking. "People are not bad or mean because they look different from you or strange," Mariano said.

"Geri gets the kids' attention and is reachable," said Mary Ann DeLessio, director of Armonk Nursery School. "She's been speaking to our 3- and 4-year-olds

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GERI MARIANO, SPEAKING TO STUDENTS AT WAMPUS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IN ARMONK

for the past few years and has a great rapport with them."

Fifth-grade teacher Marion Kelly was instrumental in arranging Mariano's presentations at Wampus. Kelly said it is important for children to understand diversity and know how to approach someone who looks different from them.

"She (Geri) is an inspiration and has many more challenges than the rest of us (do)," Kelly said about Mariano who is her former neighbor. "She's a caring, loving, giving person and is very present for her friends and family and neighbors."

Mariano's message tied into Wampus' iCare September-to-June initiative of helping students develop and reinforce habits of concern and respect on a daily basis. Principal Barbara Topiol said Mariano's appearance coincided with the school's November iCARE theme, "Appreciate People For Who They Are."

"Seeing Geri made me feel good inside to see someone so different-looking living a normal, nice life," said one fifth-grader last week.

Humor was part of last week's program when, after learning where Mariano lived, one student volunteered, "I think I went trick-or-treating at your house."



Armonk's Geri Mariano speaks to children around the country about overcoming physical limitations. Mariano, who was born with diastrophic dysplasia, visited two fifth-grade classes last week at Byram Hills' Wampus Elementary School.

"Did I give out good candy?" she asked. Laughter erupted.

At one point, Mariano asked the students whether they had pets. Several heads nodded yes.

"Do you love them? Do you take care of them every day?" she asked. "Well, babies need that care, too. I got that nurturing and care at Blythedale and am eternally grateful."

Teased in middle school, Mariano said one student who made fun of her only did it when no one else was around and said nothing when a third student was with them. Mariano remains grateful for the

overwhelming number of her classmates from kindergarten through 12th grade. "They gave me the gift of acceptance, and to them I was just Geri."

Before she started attending school, Mariano had made a self-discovery as a child. She had to wear prostheses and didn't like them. She recalled the day she wanted to go outside and her mother told Mariano that she could, only if she wore her coat. Realizing that despite her protest her mother wasn't going to retrieve the coat for her, Mariano finally got it herself.

"It was a breakthrough moment," she said. "You know when you have a 'ta-da!' moment?" Heads nodded up and down. "I learned I had the power to go where I wanted to go and at that moment it was outside."

That power has never limited her ability to achieve or try an assortment of activities. A 1985 graduate of Byram Hills High School, Mariano graduated from Smith College in Massachusetts four years later and completed a master's program in therapeutic recreation in May 2007.

"I went scuba diving at age 30 and two years later I visited a dude ranch in Wyoming," she said. A solo trip to Italy helped celebrate her 40th birthday.

She is scheduled for hip surgery next month, seven years after the same procedure on her other hip. It's just another challenge in her life that she takes in stride, like the custom-made "handle bars" she needed so she could ride a horse.

"My life is like a puzzle, and I like figuring things out," Mariano said. "You guys like puzzles?" There was a resounding "Yes!" from the students. "I do too, and it's great to fit the last piece in the puzzle."

To learn more about Geri Mariano, visit her Web site, www.justcallmegeri.com.

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