## LEARNING FROM OUR DIFFERENCES (LFOD)

As the end of the school year is upon us, Greenacres would like to highlight our Learning From Our Differences (LFOD) program. LFOD is a PTA sponsored program that teaches our students in grades K-5 about visual, hearing, developmental, physical, and learning disabilities through guest speakers.

The presentations are designed to give the students a glimpse into the challenges some individuals face, as well as the skills and strategies they've developed to work around them in order to achieve their goals. Our students are reminded that differences are all around us and that everyone, no matter their difference or disability, deserves to be treated with respect and kindness.

### KINDERGARTEN

In Kindergarten, the program consists of a broad overview of different disabilities. The presentation is coordinated by the Westchester County Office for People with Disabilities.

Greenacres had the pleasure of welcoming back Caludia, Ollie, Lucas and Jennifer who shared what their lives were like with physical and developmental disabilities. The students engaged with our presenters and talked about the fact that differences make each of us unique and that they are not something to be sad or scared about. They are simply differences. The Kindergarteners learned that a handicap or disability is a difference that affects how a part of a person's body works. The children also got a demonstration of the very unique and individualized ways that Ollie, Lucas and Jennifer's wheelchairs worked and helped them be independent.

We also had the pleasure of welcoming back Janet and her amazing (and adorable!) service dog, Madison. Janet explained to the students what her life was like as a visually impaired individual. We got to see some of the amazing technology that helps her

navigate the world - a device that tells her what color something is, a watch that speaks the time to her, and a device that tells her what bill she is paying with (to name a few).

## FIRST GRADE

In First Grade, the program centers on visual impairment. The presentation is coordinated by the Westchester County Office for People with Disabilities.

Our children had an opportunity to hear from Melissa Carney who has had visual impairments from a very early age. She spoke with the children about her experience living with visual impairments, the obstacles that this disability presents every day, and how she manages these challenges.

Melissa, who was accompanied by her service dog, Aaron, spoke about their special relationship, how he's helped her gain independence and freedom, and how it takes trust, teamwork, patience and love to build a strong partnership with her dog.

Melissa also explained she utilizes tools and technology to help assist and support her in her daily life such as a white cane allowing her to navigate the world around her safely and independently, and smart-phone applications for performing everyday activities such as counting money, identifying colors, reading, providing directions, etc. The children enjoyed hearing her personal anecdotes and experiences and asked myriad questions at the end of her presentation.

## 2nd GRADE

This year, our Second Grade program centered on understanding physical differences. We partnered with the Challenged Athletes Foundation to invite an incredible athlete and speaker, Robert Rodriguez, to inspire our students. Robert is a paratriathlete ranked 16th in the world and has competed in U.S.A. Amputee Soccer, U.S.A. Sitting Volleyball A2, Para Spartan events, and more.

Born with a birth defect called Fibular Hemimelia, Robert faced amputation at 10 months old. His journey through life was challenging, marked by the absence of a consistent father figure, experiences of abuse, and a life-changing house fire. Despite these obstacles, Robert's resilience and determination led him to remarkable achievements.

Now a dedicated father and husband, Robert has transformed his tests into testimonies. He has traveled across the country, sharing his story with over 100,000 students, and speaking at esteemed organizations such as CNBC, NIKE, Marathon Petroleum, Fullerton Police Department, and the US Department of Housing. Through his nonprofit, he provides prosthetic legs to underprivileged amputees worldwide.

Robert's powerful message, "Lead With Love," and his belief that "Anything's Possible" with a Positive Mental Attitude, resonated deeply with both students and adults. His work with the Challenged Athletes Foundation, which supports people with physical

disabilities in leading active lives, emphasizes that involvement in sports enhances self-esteem, independence, and quality of life.

The inspirational messages shared that day were not only uplifting but applicable to all our lives, reminding us that regardless of ability, anything is possible.

**3rd GRADE**

Our 3rd Grade had the privilege to welcome back Miles Forma who was born with Cerebral Palsy. Our students learned that Cerebral Palsy (CP) is a term for a group of motor disorders that affect a person's ability to control their muscles and movements.

Miles ties his presentation to the book *Out of my Mind* by Sharon Draper. The book is written in the first person and tells the story of Melody Brooks, a fifth grade student who has cerebral palsy and uses an augmentative communication device to speak. We are so grateful to our third-grade teachers for sharing this book with our students prior to Mile's visit.

Miles came to the presentation in a special motorized wheelchair, which had an augmentative communication device attached. Miles cannot speak and his motor control is limited to one hand which he uses to type on a keyboard. Once his words are written, they are spoken by the device.

While Mile's presentation was seamless, during the question-and-answer session, our students saw first hand how much more time and effort it took Miles to communicate with them as everything he wished to communicate had to be typed and spoken through his device.

Miles shared many of the challenges he faced growing up with CP – particularly in his academic environment- but his parents did not stop until they found the support and people to help him thrive. Miles spoke candidly about the challenges he faced as a person with disabilities and the impact it has had on his mental health. We hope our students took away one of Mile's most important lessons "Learning to be comfortable with people who are different is a very important life skill".

**4th GRADE**

In Fourth Grade, the program focuses on learning differences and was conducted by a very special group of speakers - our very own Scarsdale High School students!

The panel (which consisted of some Greenacres alumni), shared how their learning differences have impacted their social-emotional lives and academic careers in Scarsdale. The Fourth Graders had the opportunity to engage with the high schoolers and ask them questions about the modifications and strategies that they use to better support their learning and life goals.

The students learned that the term learning differences refers to the diverse ways and rates that all students learn. All individuals have strengths and needs. Our needs can require a shift in how certain people are taught and/or supported. Our Fourth Graders also saw that while a person with a learning difference may have to work harder than others, with the right support and strategies, he or she can still learn and achieve the same successes.

**5th Grade**

The Fifth Grade program focused on physical differences, specifically craniofacial differences. This year, we were lucky enough to welcome back Dina of MyFace.

MyFace is a non-profit organization that helps individuals with craniofacial differences obtain appropriate medical care and emotional support for their conditions. It is committed to raising awareness about these conditions and spreading the message of kindness and inclusivity.

Dina shared her personal story of growing up with Treacher Collins Syndrome. We discussed the book *Wonder* and Dina explained the similarities she felt to the title character, Auggie. One of the most important messages of the presentation was that words and actions matter. Dina recounted her struggles growing up looking different from her peers, and some of the unkindness and bullying she experienced. Perhaps just as importantly, she remembered the moments she was included. Words can hurt, but they can heal as well.

Our Fifth Graders learned that in the United States there are hundreds of thousands of people with craniofacial differences, which means that their face or head looks a little different - or very different - than most others. These individuals may have a split, "cleft", lip and/or palate, eyes that are set further apart than usual, a recessed upper or lower jaw, or may be missing an ear, for example. Some people are born this way. Others may have had an illness or accident. Often, these disparities affect more than an individual's appearance and can interfere with a person's ability to speak, hear, eat or even breathe.

The vast majority of individuals with craniofacial differences undergo multiple surgeries in their lifetime and many receive long term medical care or therapies. These treatments help, but are often painful and disruptive to daily activities, family life, school and/or work. Dina reminded our students that just because someone looks different, it doesn't mean they're different inside. Our Fifth Graders reflected on the fact that kindness and inclusion is essential for healing and dealing with the many everyday challenges that people with craniofacial differences experience.