

Shirley Oracle

Youth Venture Speaker: Take Time To Think

By M.E. Jones, Correspondent

Shirley, MA - 5/22/2009 - Youth Venture teams from across the region gathered for a year-end celebration announcing -- "Change Rocks."

Change rocks. That's a good thing. And that's what Youth Venture is all about.

More than 75 United Way Youth Venture Teams from North Central Mass and New Hampshire -- over 360 "young change-makers" and their allies (mentors,) champions (supportive teachers and friends) and parents -- were invited to take part in the celebration, held May 7 at the Courtyard Marriott in Fitchburg.

The invited guests included 100 Shirley Middle School students. Other area schools represented at the event included the Parker Charter School at Devens. Event sponsors were the United Way, Youth Venture and Mount Wachusett Community College.

Keynote speaker was Jeff Yalden, who over the last 12 years has talked to more than 4,500 youth across the United States and whose MTV show has been seen by "over 70 million youth." He was introduced as the most sought-after speaker in the world.

Billed as a motivator, educator and role model, the award-winning speaker exhibited the high-energy aplomb of a coach and a rapid-fire bark that segued from stand-up comic to drill sergeant to secular preacher. Though successful now, he came through crises to get where he is today, he said.

Tossed out by his alcoholic parents on his high school graduation day, Yalden joined the Marines and got married at 19. The marriage ended in divorce but produced two children, whose mother suddenly shifted parental responsibility to him several years ago.

When their mother left his two young daughters on a bench, with a phone call to him and "two bags between them," his commitment was solid. "I fought for custody," he said. And he got it. Now, he's the married-again father of two teenage girls, who are "different as night and day," which provides material for his routine, underscoring his message about choices and responsibility.

The audience gasped at Yalden's rugged slices of life. His self-deprecating, irreverent humor sparked laughter. But there was a moral lesson in every joke. For example, an adage about self-esteem emerges from a colorful anecdote about his daughter's melodramatic lament after a boyfriend dumped her. Somewhere amid the cycle of boyfriends and breakups, his daughter should learn that the choices she makes for herself are more important than decisions someone else makes about her, he said.

"No person, place or thing should give you what you have to give yourself."

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Story followed story, from his older daughter “kinda” overspending at the mall to a 13-year-old expectant mother at a facility Yalden’s nonprofit organization sponsors in Iowa who said “I’m kinda pregnant, you know.”

But that doesn’t make sense, he said. “There’s no kinda about it!”

At a SADD conference recently, he met a young man who had a football scholarship to Penn State when a drunk-driving accident changed his life forever. He lost his right arm. Three friends died. “There’s no kinda to what happened to him,” Yalden said.

“My point is, if you don’t know what responsibility is today, you won’t tomorrow,” he said. “Be ready to accept the consequences of your choices.”

To change the pattern of bad choices and bad outcomes is to go from reacting to responding, he said. And remember the four T’s, he advised. “Take Time To Think!”