

STMS students deal with more than routine pre-teen angst

By Kathryn Reed

“People in your life are a wing to lift you up or a weight to drag you down.”

Manny Scott said that message in several ways to South Tahoe Middle School students Jan. 14. Scott is one of the Freedom Writers – the gang members depicted in the 2007 movie by the same name.

In two sessions Friday morning he reached all the sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders in a raw but compassionate way. He threw soft questions out to start with like who likes certain music groups. They were asked to stand if they liked that artist.



Manny Scott connects with South Tahoe Middle School students.

Photo/Kathryn Reed

Then the questions got more personal, more to the core of what life is like for these young people.

Almost all have heard gunshots other than on television. About 80 percent have had their utilities cut off. About two-fifths have been asked to join a gang. Almost all have had someone close to them die. About half have seen their mother be hit or beaten by a man. About a quarter have been physically abused. About 25 percent of the students have a parent who was or is addicted to drugs

“You have a lot more in common than you have differences,” Scott told the group seated on the floor of the multipurpose room.

He wasn't there to single people out. The exercise demonstrated how people have a lot of issues going on that most people don't know about it. It's about understanding they are not alone.

A startling revelation is the number of people students know who have died from violence. The last student standing knows 10 people who have died a violent death. Another knows eight.

This is South Lake Tahoe. These are middle school students.

“We save lives by showing people around you they are loved,” Scott said.

At that moment, with a heavy silence having fallen over the room, Scott has everyone get up and hug someone. Students hugged students, teachers hugged students, the principal hugged teachers and students.

Scott connects with the kids because he's been there. His stepdad is back in prison. He grew up breaking up fights between him and his mom. They were drinkers. He was in a gang.

What helped turn Scott around was a teacher named Miss G. She started having these inner city kids write in journals. To this day Scott still does, having done so the morning of his talk in South Lake Tahoe.

Hours after Scott spoke to students at South Tahoe Middle School "Freedom Writers" was on MTV.

All of the students at STMS had the opportunity to see the movie before Scott came to campus last week.

"When I help these kids my life makes sense to me," Hilary Swank as Miss G says in the movie.

STMS teacher Cindy Cowen says essentially the same thing. She has been the catalyst to get speakers like Scott to the school, along with the help of Principal Beth Delacour and a grant from the El Dorado Community Foundation.

"I want things like this more than once a year," Cowen told *Lake Tahoe News*. "My desire is to change the culture of the school."