

## AMS celebrates Peace Day

By Joe Zavala

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Keeping 30 middle school students on task for an hour-long science class can be a real challenge for most teachers, even experienced ones. So, how about a student directing some 650 of his peers?

That was the task laid upon the shoulders of Ashland Middle School seventh-grader Tate Browne on Thursday, and the youngster pulled it off, orchestrating the sea of youngsters into a cohesive unit that, under his patient guidance, formed a giant, human peace sign on the school's grass field off Walker Avenue.

"(Browne) was in charge of excusing each team to the peace symbol, and he had to keep everything moving and coordinated — 659 kids moving from one part of the field to another part of the field," Ashland Middle School science teacher Kristi Healy said. "So he kept everything moving, and it was beautiful."

Besides teaching science, Healy advises the school's Roots & Shoots Club, a Jane Goodall-founded youth service program whose mission is "to foster respect and compassion for all living things, to promote understanding of all cultures and beliefs, and to inspire each individual to take action to make the world a better place for people, other animals, and the environment."

That certainly applied to Thursday's school-wide gathering, whose purpose was to recognize United Nations International Day of Peace, or Peace Day, which has been observed every Sept. 21 since it was established in 1981.

Healy, who's back at AMS for her 16th year after a two-year stint in Shanghai, China as part of a teacher exchange program, organized a similar International Peace Day Parade in Shanghai and decided to do the same at AMS upon returning.

"It's done all over the world," she said.

It's also one of several community projects and activities the AMS Roots & Shoots club (currently 13 members strong) has conducted under Healy. Others include a field trip to see Jane Goodall speak in Salem, a Rebirth the Earth project for which students gave away trees, and raising money for organizations. More recently, the club harvested food and is attempting to rid its cafeteria of plastic forks.

"It's a very broad spectrum," Healy said.

Leading up to Thursday's event, Roots & Shoots built a massive, puppet-like peace dove which was controlled at the moment of truth by three club members, ordered international peace day flags and an earth flag, and created Pinwheels for Peace — on each, one side is filled with words and expressions for peace, and on the other side, art.

Roots & Shoots members painted a peace sign on the lawn and every student created pinwheels in their homeroom class. Students were also introduced to an acronym for P.E.A.C.E. — Practicing generosity; Expressing truth; Acting with kindness; Co-creating balance; Experiencing joy.

"Then the Roots & Shoots (members) gathered each team and behind a peace flag they marched each team out to the field and all the teams were lined up," Healy said. "And they all had pinwheels they had made, and then the Roots & Shoots kids were standing there facing them with this giant puppet flying in the air."

Short speeches from Roots & Shoots Club members followed. First, Amara Miller, a seventh grader, explained what International Peace Day was all about, then eighth-grader Nikko Wand talked about the meaning of peace, using the acronym to illustrate.

Perhaps the most challenging job, explained Healy, was operating the peace dove, which was controlled by Elias Todd, Luna Wilhein and Max Reade, each in charge of a 10-foot pipe — one for each wing and another for the head.

"It was a little windy today, but they did great," Healy said. "It's like puppetry, in a way. And they held it during the entire ceremony."

After the speeches, Browne stepped in to guide the students to their proper place on the pre-drawn peace sign. Once in place, each student was instructed to bury their pinwheel.

“And then all of a sudden you’ve got this gorgeous, huge — it was 60 feet in diameter — peace sign that’s full of pinwheels,” Healy said. “And we were lucky to have wind, so the pinwheels were blowing in the wind.”

Pinwheels planted, Healy then spoke briefly about the definition of peace, after which the entire school observed a one-minute moment of silence. The ceremony ended with the Beyonce song “I Am Here” playing over the loudspeakers — a song she sang at the World Humanitarian Day event in 2012.

“I think it went great,” Healy said. “It definitely filled my heart and it gave them a chance to think about what peace is. The focus was it starts from within you and outward to the world. We didn’t talk about war, we didn’t go that angle. ... The weather cooperated.

“And it’s just a beautiful sight, especially when you’re standing there and they’re all holding up their pinwheels. It’s like they’re 5 years old again. It creates a lot of excitement.”

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