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Woman tells students what it's like to be bullied

What she has learned from her experience, she says, is forgiveness

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BY EMMA JACKSON

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Gabrielle Ford learned something from the years she was victimized by bullies: forgiveness.

Ford, of Fenton, brought "A Lesson in Bullying" Friday to Ardis Renaissance Academy in Ypsilanti. Her story gained national attention through several magazines and other publications. But it was the program "A Pet Story" featured on Animal Planet network that propelled her into the public eye and put Ford and her pet coon dog Izabel ("Izzy") on the speaking circuit.

Ford was diagnosed with Friedreich's ataxia, a disease that causes progressive damage to the nervous system with symptoms ranging from muscle weakness and speech problems to heart disease, when she was 12 years old. She had just enrolled in a new school and wanted to fit in with her new classmates and chose to keep her illness a secret. But there was no hiding the change in her speech pattern and her sudden "clumsiness." She became an easy target to some classmates and she endured taunts, cruel actions that changed an outgoing little girl who loved to dance into a recluse with physical and emotional bruises.

She made few friends and the loneliness prompted her to ask her mother Rhonda Hillman for a dog. Izzy soon became more than a companion - she became a motivation to live.

"I'm not going to get better, but everyday is a good day. Izzy gives me a reason and a purpose to get up in the morning," said Ford. "She's a funny dog. She follows me everywhere I go."

Izzy has even followed her master into the depths of chronic illness. Izzy suffers from a muscle disorder that is very similar to the disease that Ford deals with and is what prompted the program aired on Animal Planet.

While Izzy slept at the base of her wheelchair, Ford answered questions from students, some of them dealing with bullying.

"I was never mean to anyone else, and I didn't understand why others were bullying me," Ford told the students. "I was really sad and tried to tell them to stop, but they kept teasing me."

Ford, 24, recalls being pushed into lockers, having books knocked from her arms and being called a string of names. She encouraged students to always choose kindness.

"If you see someone sitting alone at lunch, talk to them. If someone is standing alone, not playing with others, ask them to play. If someone needs help, the nice thing to do is help," said Ford.

Ardis Principal Jacquie Dudley said Ford and Izzy were invited to visit the school to help warn kids against bad behavior.

"We had one incident where kids were making fun of a student. We wanted to be pro-active. Chances are there are others having these issues that haven't been expressed to us, and we wanted students to know they have options and they are safe," said Dudley. "We also want kids to understand how it (bullying) affects their life."

Ford has since encountered some of those classmates who said and did unkind things but says none of them has expressed remorse. "I don't hold a grudge. I talk to them like I would anyone on the street," said Ford. "I forgive them."

To learn more about Ford and her constant companion Izzy, visit Web site www.gabeandizzy.com

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