

# COMMUNITY'S KIDS LEARN SOME WORLDWIDE LESSONS

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(Courtesy photo) Six Sandpoint Middle School students hit the international stage last month during the Design for Change global conference in Spain. From left, SHS student Breckin Nevarez, Washington Elementary School teacher Ann Dickinson, DFC founder Kiran Bir Sethi, and SHS students Arika Alward, Ayiana Prevost, Evan Dickinson, Sean Gallaher and Gage Ramsay.

SANDPOINT — When a group of local youth set out to address the problem of suicide in the community, they had no idea their project would spread worldwide.



The group of six Sandpoint Middle School students represented the United States last month at the Design For Change global conference in Spain. Ann Dickinson, a Washington Elementary School teacher who started the group on their DFC quest as sixth-graders last year, said the trip was “eye opening” for all of them.

"We learned that suicide is a worldwide problem — It's not just happening around here," said group member and SHS seventh-grader Gage Ramsay.

For instance, Gage said, the directors from the Australia and New Zealand groups represented at the conference approached them because, in their countries, kids as young as 6 to 10 years old are committing suicide.

"That is way too young," Gage said. "They shouldn't even know what suicide is."

Gage said the directors said they would like to have the HOPE group help with their suicide prevention campaigns.

Another young man, a 15-year-old from Singapore who spoke at the conference, approached another HOPE group member, Evan Dickinson, after the presentation. The teen told the Sandpoint youth that he had once attempted suicide and survived. He was touched, he added, by the group's work, telling Evan "thank you" for their dedication. Ann Dickinson said the teacher from France said suicide is an issue there as well.

Gage and Evan, along with classmates Breckin Nevarez, Ayiana Prevost, Arika Alward, Sean Gallaher were the six ambassadors representing the U.S. at the conference. The 12-year-olds started project HOPE — Have Only Positive Expectations — last year as part of Dickinson's DFC elective along with three other team members, Kora Converse, Ezra Tomlinson, and Josh Read.

The group chose to focus on suicide after learning there had been six teen suicides in just two years in the community. They embarked on several tasks throughout the year, such as random acts of kindness challenges, creating a buddy bench, becoming role models for kindergartners and more.

Of the hundreds of teams across the country to submit projects covering a variety of topics, the Sandpoint kids were honored to hit the international stage with about 30 teams from across the world.

During the conference, the kids not only learned suicide is a problem worldwide, they learned about many of the issues different countries are facing today. Several of the presentations they heard impacted them.

A few in the group, including Arika, Ayiana and Sean, said the group from India really stood out to them. The India group focused their project on girls in India who were not able to get to school safely because they were being assaulted. Another group that stood out was a group of youngsters from Hong Kong. The group of 5- and 6-year-olds embarked on a successful school garden project. A team from Taiwan had a plumbing issue at their school, which they resolved with plastic water bottles, and the team from Singapore addressed obesity. The Sandpoint group agreed all of these projects and the kids who presented them were impressive.

Another youngster impressed all the Sandpoint kids as well. Jaafar from Jordan was just 9 years old and took on his project alone. His only help, Gage said, was from his mom and his teacher. Jordan used to have a "National Day," Gage said, but because of war, it "faded away." So Jaafar's mission was to bring it back. He went to all the big corporations in Jordan and asked them to help him with this mission. Dickinson said he was successful in that all the companies gave their employees a day off from their regular work to volunteer for charities or organizations within their communities.

The kids said the entire experience was "amazing" and they enjoyed learning about new cultures and all Madrid and Barcelona had to offer, including food and friendships.

Because they were there for several days before and during the conference, friendships were created throughout the week. They took photos together and some of the kids even got contact information to keep in touch with kids they met. Dickinson said her son, Evan, brought a soccer ball and the kids would go out and play together.

"It was just fun to watch all these kids who came from different countries playing together," Dickinson said. "Language and culture wasn't a barrier. It did my heart good to see that."

"We spoke the soccer language," Evan added.

Dickinson said the conference was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for the students and the adults who attended. All of the kids who presented from around the world showed potential to be the changemakers and leaders of the world, she said.

The Sandpoint group was the last to present at the conference, and Dickinson said they hit the stage with "poise and confidence." They spoke about the impact their project had, possibly preventing at least one suicide. They read a letter from a Washington State Patrolman from Seattle who learned about their project in a Daily Bee article picked up by news outlets across the country. He wrote that he has "seen first-hand more needless loss to suicide than I care to recall."

By the time they finished, Dickinson said, there was not a dry eye in the crowd. Even the founder of DFC, Kiran Bir Sethi, stood to applaud the group.

"They represented the United States well, and I think everybody should be proud of what they did," Dickinson said.

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