

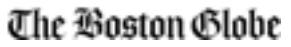
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Yo-yo master teaches about life's ups and downs



Brett Outchcunis got students involved at a recent Marshfield performance. At lower left, he moved up close for another part of his presentation. At lower right, Lauren Middleton, a 9-year-old fourth-grader illustrates the bully definition. (Photos By Stephanie S. Daly for The Boston Globe)

By Stephanie S. Daly
Globe Correspondent / November 28, 2010

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MARSHFIELD — Brett Outchcunis stands in front of a cafeteria full of children with his orange sneakers firmly planted on the floor, both hands pointing to the crowd as he nods his head and bellows, “Aww, yeah!” It is his signature move, he tells the crowd, and the youngsters laugh and cheer, quick to mimic the motion.

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Outchcunis, probably better known by his stage name, Ooch, is a motivational performer for children who easily captures their attention and connects with his audiences. He performs in schools all over New England — recent stops included the Eames Way and Daniel Webster elementary schools in Marshfield and Helen H. Hansen School in Stoughton — combining music, movement, storytelling, and yo-yo tricks. Beyond pure entertainment, the performances carry a message and teach children about important issues, such as bullying, self-confidence, and respect.

“I do shows that inspire kids to look at themselves in a more positive light and to recognize their greatest qualities and characteristics,” said Outchcunis, who has been performing for more than 10 years.

At Eames Way Elementary this month, he performed three shows: “Positive Spin,” focused on turning negative situations into positive ones; “Family Experience,” which works on getting children and parents to appreciate each other; and “Super-Power,” his most popular, on bullying.

In his “Super-Power” show for children in grades 3 through 5, he talked about bullying and how to recognize and deal with it. He included personal stories about being bullied when he was younger, like being derisively called “Oochycoochy,” prompting him to give himself the nickname Ooch. He also gave examples of what to do when confronted with a bully — all the while using music, tap dancing, and yo-yos during his presentation to keep his audience’s attention.

When talking about rising above a negative situation, he used “the elevator” yo-yo trick to help demonstrate, and later had the entire audience on its feet dancing and using movement to act out what bullying meant. The children laughed at his jokes, cheered for his yo-yo tricks, and generally ate up the show.

“He’s completely engaging. You can’t keep your eyes off him,” said Julie Willett, school enrichment coordinator. “It helps the kids realize that there’s a bullying situation going on and how to deal with it, whether they’re involved with it or watching it.”

Outchcunis said his fascination with yo-yos began at 9 with a purple Duncan Imperial model, his first, given to him by his father. Outchcunis, who grew up and lives in Wareham, brought the yo-yo to overnight camp, and quickly recognized its ability to capture attention.

“People started to notice that I had a yo-yo and they started responding to the yo-yo,” he said of his experience at camp. “All of a sudden, I was kind of ‘in.’ ”

It was not until years later, after graduating from college in 1998, just as yo-yos were enjoying a national bounce in popularity, that he would use his skills to create a career. Outchcunis, who owns over 750 yo-yos, was teaching a yo-yo class for children when Yomega, a maker of the toys, approached him about going on the road to promote its products. He did so, but after five years with the firm, he decided he wanted to put on more meaningful shows for his young audience.

“Really quickly, I realized I was able to connect with kids,” he said. “I figure if kids are going to listen to me, why not give them something of value?”

In his “Super-Power” show in Marshfield, his ability to engage children was apparent: Outchcunis made eye contact with them, asked individuals specific questions, fist-bumped those in the first couple of rows, and knelt down to talk to them during the performance. The students responded by giving Outchcunis their undivided attention for an hour-long show.

“Bullying is a timely issue, and his presentation can certainly help prevent it,” fifth-grade teacher Peter VanBuskirk said, adding: “More kids are bringing yo-yos to school, too.”

And his message about bullying rang clear and in a way that was easy for the youngsters to understand. “I learned that it’s not OK to be a bully, and to stand up for your friends,” said Katie Robinson, a 10-year-old fifth-grader. “I thought it was really fun and interesting.”

Outchcunis said having children like Robinson learn from his shows is his ultimate goal. He draws his message from his own experiences, and said that he is “not an expert on bullying, but [is] an expert on being bullied.”

“Bottom line, I’m there for the kids and I want them to get something that they’ll remember forever from that show. Believe it or not, kids remember,” he said. “They actually remember the techniques I teach them.”

Outchcunis is to perform at Nathaniel Morton Elementary School in Plymouth on Thursday and William G. Vinal Elementary School in Norwell on Friday.

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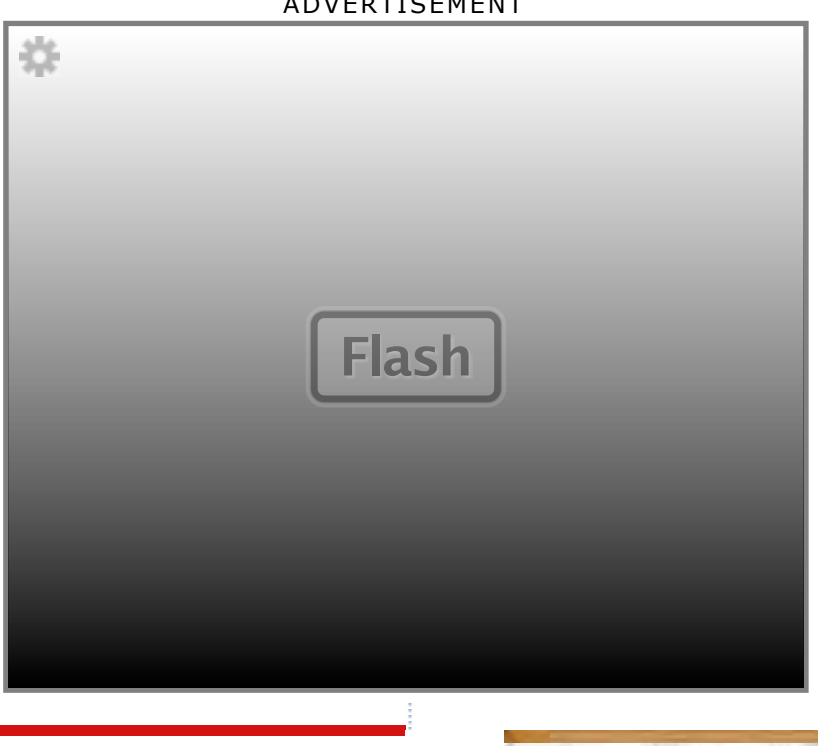
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