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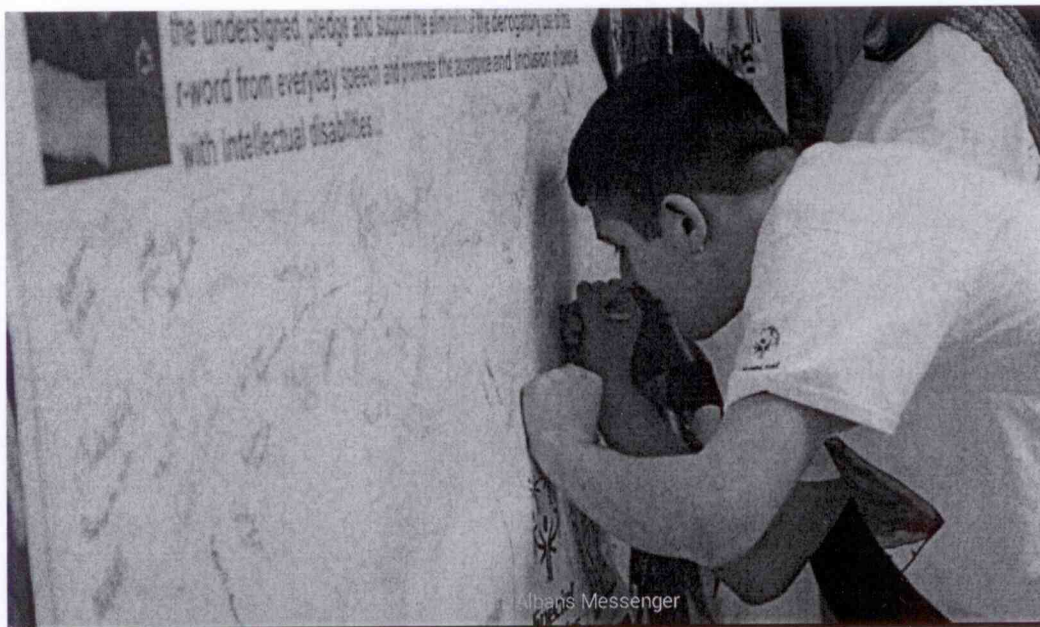
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A way with words

Groups building respect for those with disabilities

Posted on March 6, 2014



BFA sophomore Vinny Pigeon signs a pledge to be more respectful of those having disabilities.



By **Elodie Reed**
Staff Writer
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ST. ALBANS — How do you acknowledge if someone is different without excluding, discriminating against or disrespecting them for those differences?

It's a challenge that has been taken up by students, organizations and

legislators statewide. On Wednesday, Bellows Free Academy students took part in the sixth annual awareness campaign called "Spread The Word To End The Word," a nationwide effort to stop the use of the r-word, or "retard(ed)," to describe people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Students were asked to sign a pledge and promise to stop using the r-word. The BFA campaign was run by the Unified Team, a group of 20 to 30 Special Olympics athletes who are paired with partner students and practice every Thursday for the five Special Olympics tournaments held each year.

Isaac Ryea, a senior at BFA and a Unified Team partner,

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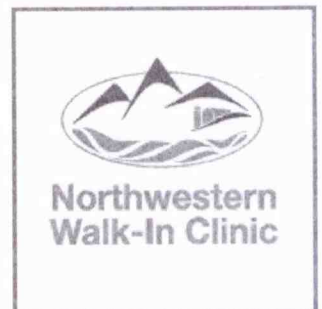
- Ed Paquin, VCDR



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said that taking away exclusionary words and participating in programs like Unified Team helps integrate people with disabilities into the rest of the community, and it also creates an environment of compassion and caring.

"[People] see it's OK to interact with people who are different just like anybody else," Ryea said. "You develop friendships and support one another."

Jim Naylor, one of the Unified Team coaches and the co-op coordinator for Northwest Technical Center, said that the six years BFA has done the campaign have had an impact on how the community treats students with disabilities. "I think it's made a huge difference," he said.

Kasia Bilodeau, another of the Unified Team coaches and the coordinator of BFA's Special Education Community Integration program, added that inclusion is something that has been embraced by BFA. "It's a cultural thing here," she said.

On the state level

A culture of respect and inclusion is currently being spread throughout Vermont as well. In Montpelier, various organizations have been working with legislators to amend state statutes to reflect respectful language, replacing terms like "mental retardation" with "intellectual disability."

One of those groups, the Vermont Coalition for Disability Rights, or VCDR, formed a study committee three years ago and made recommendations that eventually turned into the bill S. 27, the respectful language bill. It just passed through the House and Senate and is now awaiting signature by Gov. Shumlin.

Ed Paquin, president of VCDR, said by phone on Wednesday that the 300-page piece of legislation is sure to be approved by the governor. "I have every faith that [it] will go into law," he said. The hard part was proofreading such a long bill, and making sure the changes made to the statute language did not change the meaning of the law itself. "We were very careful," he said.

The goal of the bill, said Paquin, was to use language in statutes that put people first. Terms that refer to people by their disability tend to make others prejudge that person, said Paquin. "There are so many judgments we make without thinking about it."

As an example, Paquin pointed out that he uses a wheelchair, but is not "wheelchair-bound." This and other terms, especially the word "retarded" or "retardation," said Paquin, can imply something more than the facts, and can start to wrongly define people negatively. "Over time, a word gets loaded," he said.

The bill that is trying to eliminate these negatively loaded words was not the brainchild of VCDR, said Paquin, but of another group. "The Green Mountain Self Advocates really brought it to the table," he said. "It's something that came from people who care very deeply about this."

Green Mountain Self-Advocates, based out of Montpelier but with local programs statewide, is a peer-run group of 600 members with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Max Barrows, outreach coordinator for the group, said by phone Wednesday that the bill was a piece of legislation that worked to include the wider Vermont community.

"It really focuses on respecting people with disabilities," Barrows said. "It's one way for people to accept us for who we are."

Barrows, who has autism, said respectful language allows people like himself to feel comfortable in their differences and find out who they are, and also to express what they want and need. "[I've] gained more strength to speak up for myself," Barrows said.

Randy Lizotte is the leader of the St. Albans branch of Green Mountain Self-Advocates, Next Step Self-Advocacy group, and he also provides peer services through Northwestern Counseling

president



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& Support Services. Lizotte, who has a traumatic brain injury, said by phone today that respectful language at its very core acknowledges and includes those with disabilities as people, too.

"Just because we have disabilities doesn't mean we aren't people," he said.

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