



OrganWise Guys deliver inside information on the body and making healthy choices

By ANNIE GETSINGER - H&R Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, November 3, 2009 7:00 pm

DECATUR - The students at Robertson Charter School had no idea what they were in for when they walked into the auditorium to find a group of strangely dressed adults. The grown-ups, employees of the University of Illinois Extension, were dressed up to represent the characters of the OrganWise Guys program.

Hardy Heart; Peri Stolic, the large intestine; Pepto, the stomach; Windy, the lungs; the Kidney Brothers; Sir Rebrum, the brain; Calci M. Bone; Madame Muscle; Peter Pancreas and Luigi Liver, paraded before the children, each spreading his or her own special message.

The OrganWise Guys program, devised by Dr. Michelle Lombardo of Georgia in the early '90s to teach youngsters about basic human anatomy and physiology and the importance of making healthy choices in their daily lives, only recently came to the local area through the efforts of Naiman Khan, a dietitian and University of Illinois doctoral student.

The extension recently got funding from Blue Cross Blue Shield of Illinois to expand the program, which already exists in Chicago and Peoria, to area schools.

"We're targeting about 16 schools," Khan said.

Last week's assembly was only the beginning for the Robertson students. Each site in the program gets a kit with plush toys, workbooks, DVDs and other materials to continue the curriculum as long as it would like. The Extension educators plan to return to the school for monthly lessons.

The OrganWise Guys' world is both whimsical and educational. Rather than learning about the digestive system through a book, for instance, Peri Stolic, the large intestine, translates it into song on one of the DVDs.

"Solid waste elimination is my noble occupation," the gray puppet sings. "I monitor and schedule all the solid waste migration. I'm a necessary part of everybody's automation, but nobody wants to mention me in dinner conversation."

Most people probably don't picture the colon as a cute, sad-eyed character wearing a little blue bow, but there she is on the screen, singing an affirming song about her job of "taking out the body's trash."

"I am colon, hear me roar!" she exclaims at the end of the number.

Research has shown that the program sticks with kids, Khan said.

"I like the fact that it utilizes all different ways of learning," he said. "We are not just giving the kids knowledge by giving them texts. We're using games, activities, having the kids more involved in the learning process."

During the assembly, the presenters addressed four important tips. "Low fat, high fiber, lots of water, exercise," became their mantra, and the kids chanted it with them.

Khan portrayed Sir Rebrum, the brain, encouraging the students to eat a healthy breakfast.

"I was picked for the role because I'm a grad student," he said. "I'm a nerd by default."

Phyllis Herring, an Extension educator in charge of two nutrition programs, was dressed as Windy, the lungs.

"It's important because we know that there has been an epidemic of obesity with children," she said of getting the curriculum in schools, adding that the program teaches students about how nutrition works from the inside out.

Schools have been creative with the program, Khan said. One school even performed a play based on the characters.

Amber Halvorson, a dietetic intern at St. Mary's Hospital, played Calci M. Bone at the assembly. She works with community agencies as part of her rotation.

"I think it's a good idea," she said of the program. "I think it will be effective. It's important to link what you eat with what goes on in your body and let kids know that."

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