**Think Before You Act: Preventing Violence Among Louisville Youth – Kathryn Vance**

Dr. Timir Banerjee remembers well the 1997 shooting at Heath High School in Paducah, Kentucky. He was teaching in England at the time, but the tragedy hit hard as he had called Louisville home for many years. He knew he couldn’t sit by in the aftermath and promptly took action. In 1999, after getting local leaders and school system and government officials on his side, the Society for the Prevention of Aggressiveness and Violence and Adolescents (SPAVA) was formed.

“I thought I could help in teaching children how to be nice and to solve conflict in a non-violent way,” he said.

The 10-week program for elementary and middle school children meets for about an hour a week and is currently being taught in Jefferson County Public Schools as well as Catholic and private schools throughout the city. The curriculum is geared toward furthering social and emotional intelligence, anger management and anti-bullying techniques and behaviors.

Reading and vocabulary are a big part of Dr. Banerjee’s teaching in this program. With each session, he’d read to the students and teach them one or two new words, explaining that a good vocabulary can get you out of some tricky situations.

“Instead of calling someone a bad name, you can pick a different word. Instead of calling someone a liar, you can say that they have a fracture in their credibility,” he said. “You learn to say words that will probably not mean anything to the other person but will mean the same thing to you without being incendiary. I want them to learn to say what they feel without it being offensive. We have to learn the taming of the tongue.”

They focus on four main principles: respect, honor, integrity, and the value of hard work. Another major focus is taking responsibility for your actions.

“At my classes, I always say that we believe in respect, honor, and integrity. Also, we honor America, and we live by the rules; if we do not like the rules, we’ll try to change them in a manner that is accepted and in a civilized way just like Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi.”

The actions and the teachings of these two leaders are central to the program’s goals, inspiring an essay contest at the end of each program to result in student awards. In the past, students received awards to help fund post-secondary education in college or trade school. Post COVID 19 SPAVA is working on a new program in which the awards will be donated to a local charity or non-profit of the student’s choice in order to instill a spirit of generosity and “pay-it forward” attitude. Dr. Banerjee said the purpose is to counteract malicious spending in the world.

“If people are going to buy bad things with money, I’m going to try to do good things with money,” he said.

Over the years, SPAVA has had more than 60 volunteers and taught in more than 40 schools around town. Of course, the pandemic and virtual learning pushed them back a bit with not being able to teach in schools, but they are bringing lessons back to students in-person this Fall. Dr. Doris Mann, retired teacher and current principal of St. Andrew Academy, serves as the Director of SPAVA and Mark Hudson serves as President. Under their leadership and guidance from Dr. Banerjee and the rest of their Board, they are determined to bring SPAVA back to the youth of Louisville.

“We must be examples for the children. None of us is perfect in our behavior, certainly I am not. But the idea is that we try to demonstrate good manners by our behavior and actions how we can do things for others. We must shine when we help others. The more we do for others, the more we become better people.”

Teaching these lessons in schools can be difficult, but it is an experience that is truly rewarding, Dr. Banerjee said. Physicians can be great mentors in this program, showing children an example of hard work and dedication and often boosting the morale of children. For more information on how to get involved and to schedule mentor training, visit their website at [www.spava.us](http://www.spava.us) or contact Dr. Doris Mann.

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