

Learning empathy

Clever activities teach students how it feels to live with disabilities

By Christopher Braunschweig Newton Daily News

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Six unique activities were arranged Tuesday inside the Newton Congregational United Church of Christ to teach children what it feels like to live with a disability.

As part of Progress Industries' annual Second Grade Tours, the second grade classes of Woodrow Wilson Elementary School scoured the grounds of the church in large groups to test themselves at each designated station. Smiling from ear to ear the entire time, the students relished any sort of challenge they could get, expecting to pass the tests with ease.

They soon realized just how difficult these tours would become.

The Rev. Jessica Petersen, of Newton Congregational United Church of Christ, said one of the stations taught children some rudimentary sign language skills that someone with a hearing disability may experience, including the alphabet and a few signs for animals. Prior to the tours, Petersen said the children had already been learning about disabilities in the classroom.

The second station had children wear oversized work gloves to attempt everyday tasks like flipping through pages of a book, picking up individual items or untwisting the wrapper off a Tootsie Roll. Seemingly easy functions became all the more strenuous. Petersen said this particular station was to reflect what it feels like to live with arthritis or "any other fine muscle disability."

Outside the church, volunteers guided kids around the sidewalk and grounds while riding atop an adaptive bike. Unlike a store-bought bicycle, adaptive bikes fit the needs of the person riding in the seat. Sometimes designed as tricycles, the bikes allow riders with mobility issues to enjoy cycling activities.

To interpret the effects dyslexia, volunteers created a wooden mechanism affixed with a mirror. Children were to place their chin onto a wood fixture and look at the mirror ahead

of them while drawing a line in between the outlines of a triangle or a star.

“The children find it very difficult because their brains are telling them to go one way, but you know they’re supposed to be going the other way,” Petersen said. “And it just doesn’t connect.”

Students must also give instructions to make jelly sandwiches one step at a time at another station. Petersen said this activity teaches children about cognitive disabilities.

“They have to be specific and give details when you’re doing something new or is a hard task,” she said.

Volunteer Ina Heidemann, a retired Newton Community School District teacher and member of the United Church of Christ, lead the visual impairments station, instructing the children to pick out a set number of crayons to draw their house and all the usual trimmings like grass, trees and a sun.

The catch? Students had to draw it all while blindfolded, simulating what it would feel like to live with a seeing disability. These types of hands-on activities for students, Heidemann said, leave a lasting impression.

“Bottom line is: I wanted them to *physically* experience everything,” she said. “If they experience that, then they feel empathy and have good questions to ask and can better understand.”

Melissa Butler, communications director of Progress Industries, said the 40-year-old organization has been coordinating its Second Grade Tours for more than three decades. Specifically targeting second-grade students for the tours, she said the kids at that particular age “are more open” and “accepting” of others.

“It’s the perfect opportunity where you can really change their perception on something or someone,” Butler said. “They’re not at that age where they’ve come to conclusions on certain things, and the activities themselves are really fun and engaging for that age.”

Butler said she “strongly believes” Progress Industries’ Second Grade Tours have impacted the community in becoming more accepting of people with disabilities and helping the nonprofit’s cause.

Since the local nonprofit — which regularly provides supported employment, residential services and day habilitation services for more than 300 people with intellectual or physical disabilities living in Jasper and Polk Counties — moved to a new location, the site

of the tours had to be changed.

Wanting to continue the tours, Butler said Progress Industries partnered with the Newton Congregational United Church of Christ to host the annual event for area schools.

“Not only did they provide the space, they have provided the volunteers that are teaching the different stations — it was all run by (Progress Industries) staff in the past,” Butler said. “I am thrilled about this.”

As is Petersen, who said her church’s welcoming atmosphere, is a good fit for the tours.

“We want to help the kids, these second-grade students, to understand this is how you can be more welcoming of folks, this is how you can be more understanding,” Petersen said.

Upcoming tours are April 25 and May 6.

Contact Christopher Braunschweig at 641-792-3121 ext. 6560 or cbraunschweig@newtondailynews.com