

'He's a walking role model'

Teacher says Tourette's helps him connect with kids, nurture their confidence

By Mary Ellen Hopkins
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National Teacher Appreciation Day, which is Wednesday, will have a special meaning at Mountain View Elementary School this year.

As Brad Cohen, 23, wraps up his first year of teaching, he is helping his second-graders learn more than the basics.

Cohen has Tourette syndrome, an inherited disorder that causes an imbalance in a number of chemicals in different parts of the brain, resulting in a variety of behavioral problems or oddities. For Cohen, that means eye-blinking, facial twitches and loud, barking noises. The National Institutes of Health estimates that 100,000 Americans have Tourette syndrome.

Many consider Cohen's condition a disability. To him, it's an opportunity.

"I tell my students that no one is perfect. We all have weaknesses that we have to overcome, some are just more pronounced than others," said Cohen, an honors graduate from Bradley University in Peoria, Ill. "I tell them I overcame it and they can, too. But they'll have to work hard at it."

Cohen is open and honest about having Tourette's, and encourages his students to ask questions. They do.

Do you make noises in your sleep? "No."

Do you make noises in the movie theater? "Yes, and sometimes I'm asked to leave."

After interviewing at 25 schools, Cohen was offered a position at Mountain View. Principal Jim Ovbey saw the opportunity.

"We have students with disabilities, and we encourage them to do their best and be their best. Brad is a wonderful example of what you can accomplish. He's a walking role model," said Ovbey. "And it's reciprocal, because we gained a wonderful teacher."

Hilarie Straka, an administrative assistant, needed just five minutes with Cohen to know he was right for the job.

"I've never had anyone impress me the way Brad does. With all he's been through, he's so comfort-



Photos by ANDY SHARP / Staff

Learning opportunities: Teacher Brad Cohen talks with second-grader Cindy Brown, 8, about her work during class at Mountain View Elementary. Cohen draws on his experiences with Tourette syndrome to teach his students about overcoming obstacles and appreciating differences.

able and confident," said Straka. "And I knew the Tourette's wouldn't be a problem in class because kids don't have the same hang-ups that adults do."

She was right.

"It was different when we first heard his noises," said Jacquelyn Kasper, 7. "Now, nobody notices."

"When he first came into class we were all laughing a lot," said Valerie Levy, 8. "But now we forget about it."

Scott Minear, 8, enjoys the class. "He's a fun teacher, and we get to do a lot of neat projects. And when you get used to it, it's like he doesn't even have Tourette syndrome. Besides, he taught us about it, so we know," he said.

Ovbey and Straka have gotten only positive response from parents.

"I can't say enough good about him, though I will admit there was some apprehension at first," said Tammy Minear, Scott's mother. "He was young, just out of school, and he has Tourette's. But it was neat to work with him and see his confidence and enthusiasm. And he has done wonders for my son, who was shy and lacking in self-esteem. Now my son excels."

"He's doing a phenomenal job. He's so dedicated and such a good role model," said Sharon Kasper, the mother of Jacquelyn. "After you're with him for a while, you don't even notice the Tourette's."

Cohen has a great sense of humor and doesn't mind when the laugh is on him. "I tell the kids I'm terrible at hide and seek. I always lose," he said.

Cohen was diagnosed with Tourette syndrome when he was 13, but had been exhibiting symptoms since he was 7.

"Growing up was tough because people didn't

know a lot about Tourette," he said. "Nobody wanted to be my friend. Kids would fight me to shut me up. Teachers thought I was doing it on purpose and sent me out in the hall."

He remembers fifth grade. Not for the special science project he completed, or for the field trip he went on, but for being embarrassed: "My teacher made me stand in front of the class, apologize for making noises and promise never to do it again. Of course I did, and was sent out in the hall."

Cohen believes that was a pivotal point in his life. He says his teachers lost sight of Brad the kid and focused on Brad the problem.

"I decided to be a teacher so I could make a difference," he explained.

So far, he's doing just that.

"He's wonderful because he promotes self-confidence and teaches the students to appreciate all kinds of differences in children and adults," said first-grade teacher Stacey Keller.

"We're so lucky to have him," said Straka. "I really think we are blessed at Mountain View because he could have slipped through our fingers."

MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about Tourette syndrome, call the Tourette Syndrome Association of Georgia, 5600 Roswell Road N.E., 404-250-4322, or check these Web sites for information and links to more sites:

Tourette Syndrome Home Page:
<http://www-personal.umd.umich.edu/~infinite/tourette.html>

Gilles de la Tourette's Syndrome:
<http://www.voicenet.com/~melech/tourette/ts.html>



Colorful greeting: The door to Mountain View Elementary teacher Brad Cohen's second-grade classroom sets the scene for creative activities within.