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Holocaust survivor visits Crest Academy

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Crest Academy students received a lesson in self-determination Monday from a woman who turned her own childhood experiences into a way to help others.

Paulette Pfeiffer, a petite 4 feet 11 inches tall, whom colleagues and kids alike call “Tinkerbelle,” had a rough beginning in life.

She was born in Russia at the end of World War II to Polish Jewish parents. At the time of the war’s end her family was in hiding.

After the war, her parents went back to Poland only to find there was nothing left of their family.

Times were hard. Pfeiffer’s brother died of starvation.

The family was sent to a displaced persons camp in Germany, a former Hitler Youth training camp, which is where Pfeiffer spent her early childhood.

She told students she still remembered her first gift, a coat, and her first day of real joy, sledding on a hill with her younger sister on a sled made by their father.

Her younger sister grew up taller than she because of the availability of good food at the camp compared to her own infancy where any food was scarce.

At one year old, I weighed about 9 pounds she told the students.

Even in childhood photos her baby sister is bigger than she is. After living in the camp for several years, the family moved to Argentina as an expedient way of getting to the U.S.

There were quotas from different countries for foreigners trying to get into the U.S., she told the students.

Argentina’s quota was filled by the time the family arrived there, but it was one of the countries that was open to Holocaust survivors as well as Germans after the war.

Her next-door neighbors in Argentina were Nazis, she said.

Living in Argentina, Pfeiffer learned Spanish, which was helpful in their next country, Bolivia, where the family moved when she started



Photo by D.J. DeJong

Paulette “Tinkerbelle” Pfeiffer explains to Crest Academy students how her childhood experiences as a survivor of the Holocaust prompted her to begin a mentorship program for kids whose parents are in prison. She encouraged students to use their own experiences to make decisions about what they want to do in life.

school, again in search of entry to the United States.

There was another move to Brazil, where she learned Portuguese, before Pfeiffer’s family was able to enter the U.S.

She described her experiences growing up starting from her earliest memories of her family’s living space being the bathroom of a barracks at the camp in Germany and later sharing a house with five fami-

lies to growing up and learning the customs and languages of South American countries to coming to the U.S.

The family waited 15 years to get to the U.S. she said.

With that kind of background, Pfeiffer said she wanted to do something important with her life.

In 1978, she was a leader in the creation of the Court Interpreters Act, which makes it

necessary to be licensed and trained in order to act as an interpreter in court. Before that time, anyone could act as a translator, and the quality of the work was not regulated.

In the late 1990s she began mentoring children whose parents were incarcerated in Illinois in conjunction with a women’s prison.

She started with 12 children who spent most weekends at

her house. Some of the kids she worked with had been found on the streets. Two had been left at school after their parents had been arrested that day.

After a move to South Carolina, she expanded the outreach with “We Stand For Kids,” which started with 34 kids of which 29 are either currently in college or recently graduated.

The South Carolina program has further expanded to the next generation to serve the grandchildren of prisoners.

The program has expanded to Florida, where she and her husband Neal now reside with a new name: “Silent Victims of Crime.”

With the support of schools, Boys & Girls Clubs and other entities, Pfeiffer has created a mentorship for children whose parents are in jail and who might not have support at home or even have a home.

The support includes accompanying children to visit their parents in jail.

The organization’s goal is to break the generational cycle of incarceration through a holistic approach that encourages children and families of inmates to become constructive members of society.

The incarcerated parents, she said, are one hundred percent behind the program and there are kids on waiting lists in Florida.

“It is 7 times more likely that a child of a prisoner will go to prison than a child who’s parents are not in prison,” she said.

Pfeiffer said she has been lobbying for and hopes to be able to get a bill passed within the next three years to protect the children of inmates.

She encouraged Crest students to use their own experiences to help them find what they want to do in the same way her experiences as a small child prompted her to help children in similar circumstances.

Pfeiffer’s granddaughter, Chloe, is a student at Crest Academy and the talk was set up by Chloe’s mother Shelly Kelley.

For information about Silent Victims of Crime visit silentvictimssofcrime.org.