

Fair Oaks students take speaker's advice to heart for positive attitude

By Dan Aznoff -

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The scenario was not promising: a motivational speaker from the world of insurance speaking to an auditorium filled with adolescents.

But the results have been something to get excited about. The teenagers have realized rewards from the accomplishment of simple tasks, while teachers and parents have noticed a major change in the attitudes of the young people.

The epiphany began in October when Fair Oaks resident Carmen Garcia attended a four-hour speech by Carl Van of the International Insurance Institute to more than 300 managers and claims professionals at Allied Insurance in Sacramento. After the presentation, Garcia asked Van to deliver a modified version of the presentation the next day to her son's Career Day honors class at Will Rogers Middle School.

Van, who normally charges \$5,000 to \$10,000 per speech, agreed to volunteer. Besides shifting the challenges and analogies to be used during his presentation, Van prepared for the younger audience with bags of candy to substitute for the bottles of wine he usually gives away during his interactive dialogue.

"The only reason the kids were really excited about it was because we were going to get out of class," said Garcia's son, 13-year-old Garrett. "Nobody was excited about the idea of a lecture from some guy in a suit who sells insurance."

Van was not just another man in a suit. He founded the International Insurance Institute in Sacramento in 1998 with a mission to reintroduce the word customer into the overused phrase "customer service." Over the past eight years, the institute has provided continuing education and on-site education to more than 54,000 adjusters and claims professionals throughout the United States and Canada.

"We were all surprised when he (Van) admitted that he had lost a promotion at his first job in the copy room at a large insurance company because he did not have a positive attitude," Garrett Garcia said. "He explained to us that our performance is a combination of 80 percent attitude and only 20 percent ability. And that we should always do our best, no matter how menial the task or unimportant we think it is."

Van told the youngsters that outstanding performance means providing more than what people expect. As proof, Van responded individually to each thank-you letter he received from students who attended the session.

"These kids are too bright to be fooled by any kind of form letter. They would have caught on to that trick in a minute," Will Rodgers teacher Tara Larson said. "They were very impressed with the fact that Mr. Van sat down and personally responded to each of the 46 letters he received from the kids. They knew that because each letter mentioned specific items from the letter written by the student."

Larson said her students have been more responsible about finishing assignments on time since Van's visit. She described the overall changes in her classroom as "uncharacteristic maturity." Since October, the teenagers have looked beyond themselves with an eye toward long-term goals.

"Many of the students have gone far beyond what was expected (of them) in terms of the quality and depth of their assignments," she said. "That has been a direct result of the challenge to do the unexpected Mr. Van gave each student."

The honors class listened intently as Van described how prioritizing tasks daily can create more time in your day, regardless of whether you are a student or a busy executive. Carmen Garcia recalled that the students in her son's class were fascinated by details of how Van and his family were forced to flee their home in suburban New Orleans in the path of Hurricane Katrina.

From his freshly repaired offices in New Orleans, Van said he enjoyed the challenge of addressing the young audience and appreciated how the honors classes have given new meaning to his words.

"It was intriguing to talk to the young people and read their letters, to know what aspects of my training have substance with segments of the population that have absolutely nothing to do with claims or insurance," Van said. "I was able to hear my presentation again for the first time through their ears."

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About the writer:

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