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Speaker teaches teens leadership, gratitude

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Hundreds of juniors and seniors piled into the auditorium at South Burlington High School on Thursday morning to hear nationally known youth motivational speaker and author Ed Gerety.

Most students were just happy to get out of their honors American studies and advanced placement U.S. government classes for 45 minutes. But Gerety immediately engaged the teens with simple physical challenges, such as clapping and hooting. Within minutes, the 450 students were laughing and Gerety had their attention.

The school's Parents' Association sponsored the event with the help of grant funding from the Vermont Community Foundation and North Country Federal Union. According to parent volunteer Suzie Crews, the parent organization chose Gerety for his ability to motivate teens to surround themselves with positive role models and to make good choices.

"We're not a fund-raising organization; we sponsor events that benefit the majority of students and the main thrust of Gerety's presentation is to teach kids leadership and gratitude. I think his presentation will really set the tone for the school," said Crews, SBHS Parents' Association co-president.

Gerety also spoke to the freshmen and sophomore classes and held an evening presentation for adults.

Gerety challenged the 17- and 18-year-olds to practice three random acts of kindness each day, whether it's simply picking up a soda can in the parking lot, or helping someone they don't know find a lost item.

Gerety used real-life stories of teens he's met from around the country to drive home the point that every decision comes with consequences, some positive and some negative. He told the students compelling stories about teens from around the country who confided in him. The stories included everything from death to alienation and bullying.

"We don't know everything about everyone, we don't know everyone's story," Gerety said. "If you're giving someone a hard time, stop and let them pass."

For junior Justin Lynch, 16, the examples Gerety shared made sense and he was glad for the opportunity to hear him speak.

"Everything he said was a wake-up call. I'm going to be nicer to people and try to make a difference in any way I can," Lynch said.

Senior Mia Franzoni, 16, agreed.

"I'm definitely going to think twice about judging another student; he's right," Franzoni said.

A group of seniors on the SBHS field hockey team huddled together in the back of the auditorium and put Gerety's teachings into practice. Becca Lee, 17, blurted out, "I love you" to a friend.

"He motivated me to think about things in a different way and I love Tori," Lee said.