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Chip Minemyer | Once shy student blossoms into a confident young man, gives back

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Chip Minemyer



Justin Capouellez



"People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

– Justin Capouellez

In just four years since leaving Greater Johnstown High School, Justin Capouellez has worked with the homeless in Pittsburgh, volunteered with parole officers in Seattle, revised his career path and become an accomplished public speaker on the verge of a college degree.

No wonder the once shy high school senior called stepping back into a Greater Johnstown classroom “surreal.”

Capouellez is assistant coordinator of the Youth Leadership Program, a partnership between the Johnstown Toastmasters Club and the city school district that is training 50 senior-high students in public speaking.

Teacher Tracey King reached out to the Johnstown chapter of the Toastmasters International organization. Johnstown Toastmasters Club members Dave Jones and Larry Olek brought an existing national program to their local community – sending instructors into the classroom at no cost to the district. Olek has served as coordinator of the effort, which launched Dec. 5 and ends later this month.

“This has been a win-win situation,” Capouellez, a 2011 Greater Johnstown graduate, said of the Youth Leadership Program. “It’s a stepping-stone for me in my career and development.

“And the students get to see me as one of their own – not too much older than them – who is using the things we work on in the class in a real-world context, seeing that those ideas work.”

The elective class teaches communication skills while helping the students gain confidence and comfort with speaking in public.

Those are attributes Capouellez said he didn't have when he was a student. Olek recalled that King quickly noticed a contrast between the introverted young man who sat in her classroom years earlier and the one who returned to work with her current students in 2015-16.

"She remembers Justin as being very quiet," Olek said.

"When he did a 10-minute talk as a model for the students, she was amazed."

That's a mix of training and real-world experience, Capouellez said.

"It's kind of surreal going back," he said. "The seats are in the same places. Most of the teachers are in the same classrooms.

"But if I had been told that I would have come back like this, I probably wouldn't have believed it."

Capouellez left Greater Johnstown hoping to attend Liberty University and become a youth pastor, but he wasn't accepted into that program.

He shifted focus and enrolled at Penn Highlands Community College, where he earned an associate degree in psychology and was elected president of the Student Government Association.

Capouellez then landed at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where he will earn a bachelor's in psychology this spring.

Ca-pouellez is a member of the Indiana Chapter of Toastmasters.

For five years, Ca-pouellez has volunteered with No Walls Homeless Ministry in Pittsburgh, visiting shelters and camps and helping connect those in need with support pro-grams.

In June and July 2013, he worked with the Washington State Department of Corrections – including a two-day homelessness simulation. Capouellez hopes to go west again soon. He has applied for a graduate school program at the University of Washington.

He called being rejected on that first application to Liberty “probably all part of a divine purpose that I’ll understand fully later.”

Right now, he finds purpose in the classrooms at his high school alma mater – working with youth who may be shy, as he once was, or who may face much deeper challenges.

“The thing I enjoy most is just sitting in the classes and listening to the students’ speeches,” he said.

“The majority of kids in there have been through some hard things in their lives. But they’re willing to be open and share their experiences. And others are willing to listen and provide support.

“This program is really working to bring them together as a group as they learn more about one another, and that inspires me. I have a story that’s similar to theirs. Every day they see me as a testament that there is a way out, that you can overcome life’s obstacles.”

Capouellez points to his relationship with Olek as critical to his development.

Capouellez was in middle school when he first heard Olek speak. He reached out to Olek years later, looking to improve his own skill and comfort with talking to groups.

Olek became his mentor, and even coached Capouellez on how to dress and walk – how body language is a form of communication. Olek gave Capouellez a red tie so he would look the part at IUP, then other ties for other venues.

Capouellez will wear a purple tie – the color of the University of Washington – for his video interview for a graduate position there.

“Larry really personifies selflessness,” Capouellez said. “It’s been so valuable just being able to come in under his wing and see how he acts – how he enters a building, how he moves through the halls, how he walks into a classroom, how he engages with the students – little things like that that I can observe and that will make me better.”

Now, he’s taking that message to students in the school where he was once a reserved student in Mrs. King’s class.

“It’s all about the people you meet and the influences you have,” Capouellez said.

“You never know at the time how important something like that is going to be.

“It’s the relationships in your life that open doors for your future.”

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