



IN THE SCHOOLS

Strongman's Message to Kids: Focus on Future

"OmegaMan" Marc Wilkes gives anti-bullying talks in Polk schools.

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LAKELAND | As he rips a nearly 1,700-page phone book in half with his bare hands and sounds of awe stream out from the audience, OmegaMan knows he has the students' attention.

Now the positive message can begin.

"Today this is not a phone book. It is a book of negative choices," he said to a crowd of kindergarten through eighth-grade students at St. Paul Lutheran Church and School recently. "Rip up every past negative choice," he said then. "You can't change your yesterday, but you can change your tomorrow."

Dressed in his superhero threads, OmegaMan, aka Marc Wilkes, will bring his message to more than 30 Polk County schools this spring during anti-bullying assemblies.

The superhero role is bait but it's what gets the students to pay attention to the message, Wilkes said.

"If I walked in here with a suit and tie on, the kids would not pay attention to me.

But if I go in and break a baseball bat, that is entertainment and gives me a chance to bring my positive message," he said.

Wilkes became OmegaMan in 2007 and has been lifting weights for years.

Now he does 300 to 400 assemblies per year and has done assemblies for between 80 percent and 85 percent of the schools in Polk County.

Wilkes, 37, is sort of a hometown celebrity. He is from Cleveland, but has lived in Lakeland since 1997 with his wife and two daughters.

"He is a local person, he's really basically a local hero," said Audrey Kelley-Fritz, the senior manager of prevention, health and wellness at Polk County Schools. "Kids recognize him in Walmart and Publix as OmegaMan."

Along with his local status, Wilkes' mode of delivery helped the district decide to bring the superhero's message into the schools, Kelley-Fritz said.

"We are always looking for innovative programs and creative ways to teach our students," she said.

The multidisciplinary anti-bullying committee made the recommendation and the assemblies are being paid for through district funds, she said.

Wilkes' anti-bullying message stems from his own experiences as a child. Wilkes grew up with a speech impediment and had to overcome criticism from others. He wants students to know they can overcome. "I really believe the worst kind of bullying is verbal. Negative words could really penetrate and stop them from achieving their destiny," he said.

Wilkes created OmegaMan as a role model for students lost among the threat of violence, drugs, alcohol and major gang violence often found in schools, he said.

"I'm using my muscles and my talent to give a positive message for the kids," he said.

His assemblies include several feats of strength, including the phone book, breaking a baseball bat in half and lifting children into the air.

"Once you grab someone's attention, you can get a message of hope in their lives," he said.

Wilkes said he hopes OmegaMan continues to make an impression on students long after the shock and awe wear off.

After all, "superheroes never die," he said.

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