

## Pocono kids learn to meet, embrace life's challenges

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Life is hard. It's dauntingly hard for some people. That's an important message to deliver to young people. But it can be a great life lesson when a capable speaker also points out that with determination, even someone with a tough life can survive and triumph.

Tobyhanna Elementary Center Assistant Principal Phyllis Cournan arranged for Dr. Nathaniel Williams to share his inspiring story recently with the school's fifth-graders. They heard how Williams and his 11 brothers and sisters were orphaned when he was just 5 years old, split up among foster families and struggled with years of separation and upheaval. Yet despite that family and personal ordeal, Williams went to college, ultimately earning four degrees, and now is executive director of his own company, the nonprofit HumanWorks Affiliates in the Lehigh Valley. The organization oversees group homes, foster care and other supports for children and has a \$10 million annual operating budget.

Cournan deserves credit for organizing a series of special programs for fifth-graders to focus on perseverance, making good choices and maintaining academic motivation. Guest speakers have included a local resident who grew up in public housing in New York, but now runs a recreation program; Pocono Mountain School District's superintendent of schools; and a young woman with one leg and one arm who nonetheless is a competitive skier. Their sharing of their experiences serve as an eye-opener for youngsters, so self-absorbed at a tender age, teaching kids that everybody faces hard knocks at times.

Kids today are bombarded with commercial messages and cultural images that are exciting, beautiful and often unachievable. Their own reality is often starkly different. Many are growing up in modest or even poor homes, with single parents struggling to pay the bills, with adults whose work takes them far from home for long hours. Alcoholism, drug use, domestic abuse and other problems can make the normal challenges of getting to school, fitting in, wearing the right clothes, even eating a nutritious meal or laying claim to a loving parent seem impossible at times. The future often does not look bright for such children.

Yet Williams' inspiring talk encouraged students to develop resilience, self-control and a positive outlook. Hats off to him and to Cournan for encouraging kids to meet life head on, to face life's challenges and to seek — and appreciate — life's rewards.