

Entrepreneur aims to inspire dyslexic youth

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NORWALK - Evan Paul started playing video games to be alone and escape from the realities of middle school. A few years later, the 19-year-old has turned his refuge into a million-dollar business and his success into inspiration for learning-disabled children everywhere.

Paul, who is dyslexic, spoke to a group of students with dyslexia and learning disabilities at Nathan Hale Middle School yesterday morning, promising them that hard work can help them overcome any problems they may have.

The Lynnfield, Mass., native recently completed his freshman year at the University of Arizona and is founder and chief executive officer of the online game-trading site, egameplace.com, valued at about \$30 million. Paul has used his success to inspire students struggling with learning disabilities and last year founded the Dyslexic Dream Foundation.

"Going through school I felt like I was a stupid failure," Paul told the students. "Slowly but surely because I did not give up, I eventually began to learn to read and things began to come together for me, and that's when I started up the game-trading business. It was by no means easy, though."

Paul would play video games when he came home from school, which usually was a long day of bullying and struggling in class. He was misdiagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and was not accurately diagnosed with dyslexia until just before high school.

He told the students that even though he struggled and did not have a good middle school experience, he and those like him are lucky because they know what it is like to have to work hard.

"When I was younger, the only people that believed in me were myself and my family," said Paul. "Even today, the only people that matter are yourself and your parents."

In 2004, when he was 15, Paul started the Web site egameplace.com, with the "e" standing for Evan. The site is designed to allow gamers to swap games with each other for free, which Paul said allows children to continue playing while keeping costs down. He said there are nearly 30,000 active traders on the site.

Kevin, a seventh-grader whose mother asked his full name not be published, attended the speech and was impressed by Paul's values.

"I always try, and now I know if I keep trying, things will be good," he said. "My favorite part was learning about how you can block out what bullies can say to you and how you can do what you want to do."

Paul said the site makes \$5 million to \$8 million a year.

"He is a living, breathing model that you can do well," said Lori Kolbusz, a teacher and head of the special education and literacy program at Nathan Hale.

"His message was very uplifting, and he gave full credit to how hard it was and how important it is to believe in yourself. It's important because this age group now is in the process of questioning themselves."

Smart Kids with Learning Disabilities Inc. gave Paul the Youth Achievement award for 2008 in a ceremony at the Stamford Marriott last month. Nathan Hale is the third school he spoke to this week, and he plans more talks throughout the summer.

Last year, he started the Dyslexic Dream Foundation and donates 70 percent to 80 percent of his earnings to fund programs to help students overcome learning disabilities.

"The goal of the foundation is to raise awareness and to educate teachers and schools," he said. "I also set up scholarships because some of the great private schools that can help cost more than some colleges."

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