

Mine victim visits TMS students

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Of the Suburbanite

TENAFLY — Julio Tinoco Perez from Rama, Nicaragua, visited Tenafly Middle School students last week to share his story about how he lost one eye and a forearm in a land mine explosion.. Julio was in the United States for medical care.

The boy has returned to his country, but his brief 2 fi hour visit helped TMS students make a personal connection to their school-wide commitment to the worldwide removal of land mines.

Perhaps Jian Lann Chang, seventh grade student best described how Julio's affected the students. Change said, "Julio embodies many of our same qualities. He's our age, he laughs with us. It's easy to relate to him. When he goes home, we hope when he goes home he will remember all people will want to get the job of landmine removal done."

Sixth Grader Ben Gallagher, who presented school's gifts to Perez, said, "Meeting Julio was a moving experience for me rather than reading about land mine victims on the internet or in a book. It is too bad that all of the sixth graders could not have



TENAFLY MIDDLE SCHOOL PHOTO

Tenafly Middle School's landmines removal project now has a face and name, Julio Perez of Nicaragua (in hat). He shared his story of how a land mine blew away his eyesight and left forearm. Shown are Middle School Principal Bill Belluzzi, Mark Hyman, sixth grade teacher and school coordinator for the land mine project; Martha Perez, Julio's mother; Julio; Maria Martinez, interpreter; and Dr. Ann Powell, vice principal.

a meeting with Julio because it would motivate them to help our cause more."

Middle School Language Arts Teacher Mark Hyman coordinates the Conscience Project

and the Landmine Removal Initiative as advisor to the school's Landmine Awareness Club. He said, "Compassion doesn't have boundaries. This project is about crossing boundaries."

The visit went well but earlier everyone was uncertain. After arranging Julio's visit, Hyman, the students and staff didn't know what to expect. Would Julio want to talk about his accident? That was the foremost question on everyone's mind. The first meeting took place in the school library where members of the Land Mine Club waited anxiously for Julio to arrive with his mother, Martha Perez, 28, and host-interpreter Maria Martinez of New York City. Coming from a remote mountain place without electricity or running water, Julio, who only had a first grade education, did bridge the cultural gap.

A hushed silence spread around the room when Julio entered. He is a small boy who affectionately holds his mother's hand and looks much younger than his age. A big T-shirt hides the disfigured arm. Speaking Spanish in a soft voice 13-year-old Julio told the students about the accident which happened

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three years ago. At age of 10, Julio was working in the fields when his dog began chasing a rabbit into a burrow. Curious Julio used his machete and poked at the hole. Then suddenly the buried landmine exploded and his mother found him covered in blood. The landmine was a remnant from the 1979 Sandinista revolution and subsequent Contra war in which the U.S. had a supporting role. Each year according Perry Baltimore of the Marshall Legacy Institute,

which had visited the school in November, more than 26,000 people are killed or maimed by landmines each year. The challenge to remove these devices is enormous with an estimated 70 to 100 million land mines buried in places like Nicaragua, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Angola and Cambodia.

While Julio was an unfortunate victim, he was also lucky to have a mother who persistently fought to get him medical care. It took some time — more than two years — but last July under the Marshall Legacy Institute, Julio and his mother came to New York City where Drs. Lee

and Louis Angioletti, a father-son team at New York Ear & Eye Infirmary attempted to save his sight but ultimately Julio got a prosthetic eye. At Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center Julio's lower forearm was refashioned into a pincer-like appendage capable of feeling and lifting objects. Without hesitation he showed the students his forearm.

The preadolescent students asked Julio many questions about how his friends and classmates responded to his disability. Some even tried to speak Spanish. Perez told them no one made fun of him. He was

accepted; in fact, he bathes in the river with the girls, and joked that "They know I cannot see them."

Later in the day at the Landmine Awareness Club meeting Hyman encourages the students to talk about Perez's visit in a Quaker-style circle.

Danny Cohen said, "Julio has a lot of courage. He is very brave. It must be very hard to go to a foreign country and get a prosthesis. Here when a person has a handicap, people look you and then look away."

Daniel Ratty, reminded the group of the bigger political picture, "that the United States

hasn't signed the treaty to ban land mines."

Cohen added, "I am happy that no one made fun of him. No classmates. No bullies."

Chang said, "It was good that he has no embarrassment. But seeing Julio makes us wonder what if I had a pincer or was blind?"

James Zarwi, another sixth grader, said, "At least he can move his hand. Julio was so confident and brave"

As the club meeting came to an end, Maria Marcantonio agreed with Zarwi and quietly concluded, "He was so upbeat. I hope to be more like him."