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Students hear about spirit and a white bear

Posted By Janet Richards

Posted 20 days ago

Belleville – Several hundred students in Hastings and Prince Edward might have went home April 21 talking about the “Spirit Bear.”

The bear, the white Kermode, is an endangered subspecies of the North American black bear that lives only in a small corner of British Columbia.



Simon Jackson tells the story of the Spirit Bear and the campaign to save it at Centennial Secondary School April 24.

Janet Richards photo

In a special event hosted by the Hastings and Prince Edward District School Board, students had an opportunity to hear about the bear and the efforts to save it from Simon Jackson, founder of the Spirit Bear Youth Coalition.

Jackson’s message was not only one of hope for the unique bear, it was also about the environment, a sustainable economy, perseverance and the ability of one person to make a difference.

Almost all 54 schools in the board were represented at Jackson’s presentation, “The Power of One, the Spirit of Youth.”

Jackson was only 13 when he formed the Spirit Bear Youth Coalition, an organization that eventually led to a historic land use agreement, the largest land protection measure in North American history, in April of 2001. Jackson, now 25, told the students why he shares his story. It’s “not because I’m remarkable, but because I’m unremarkable,” he said.

Jackson was seven years old when he first saw a bear on a family camping trip and wanted to know everything he could about them.

He set up lemonade stands and raised \$60 to help save the endangered Kodiak bear in Alaska. A few months later he heard the bear had been saved.

“I thought, ‘I saved the Kodiak bear,’” said Jackson. “Of course I didn’t but it made me realize one person could make a difference.”

When he first began working to save the Spirit Bear, Jackson said his friends thought it was cool, but he gradually lost his friends and was bullied as other kids “just thought it was weird” he was still trying to save the animal.

In 2000, Time magazine named Jackson, then 17, one of only six young people as its “60 heroes for the planet”.

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“I don’t think I’m a hero,” said Jackson, but his campaign did change from a middle school project to a global issue “pretty much overnight.”

Celebrities and other activists took up the cause and a letter-writing campaign stepped up with “thousands and millions of people” writing to the premier of BC.

While 200,000 hectares of the bear’s habitat has been protected, Jackson said “good enough is not good enough,” as there is still another 60,000 hectares to preserve.

The Spirit Bear has been named the official mammal of B.C. and is also the mascot for the 2010 Olympic Winter Games.

“With the world watching the greenest games ever, they can’t kill the mascot,” Jackson said with a smile.

He’s been the subject of a made-for-TV movie, and a full-length feature animated film on the bear is currently under production.

Jackson said a portion of ticket sales from the film, set for a 2009 release, will go directly to the Spirit Bear campaign.

He said the only way to save the Spirit Bear is to protect a large enough population of black bears that carry the double recessive gene. He said the species cannot be reproduced in captivity or moved to other habitats. The bear catches more salmon than others and the salmon carcasses left to rot on the forest floor make the trees grow to the size they do, in turn helping to regulate the climate.

Part of the efforts to save the bear depend on creating a sustainable economy for the First Nations community in the area.

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Asked by one student what jobs there are to replace the logging done by the community, Jackson said it is not about a lack of job opportunity or a lack of infrastructure, but about creating a balanced economy. He hopes the Spirit Bear film will raise the \$50,000 he said it will take to create hundreds of jobs in the community as opposed to a handful of part-time logging jobs.

He told students the easiest thing they could do to help the cause is write a letter.

"It's easy to send emails or sign a petition, but to take five minutes to write a personal letter represents 100 people," Jackson said. "People don't write letters anymore."

He said it initially took tens of thousands of letters to make one letter count.

"That's the power of one," he noted.

He also told students they could join the Spirit Bear Youth Coalition at no cost.

Jackson said he knows the Spirit Bear isn't the most important issue facing the world today, but he thinks it is important.

He described himself as "one young person, not armed with any remarkable intellect or skill" but "passion can make a difference," he added.

Jackson said once the bear is saved, which he believes it will be, there are a number of issues he believes are worth pursuing but he has become passionate about the power of young people to create change. He said young people have the enthusiasm and time.

"Every person counts and every decision counts," Jackson said. "There are no insignificant endeavours."

Jackson's presentation was part of the school board's Earth Week celebration. Prior to his speech, several schools were recognized for their green efforts through the Better Schools and EarthCARE programs. EarthCARE is an environmental education partnership component of the Better Schools program with partner Ameresco Canada.

More information about Jackson and his campaign can be found at www.spiritbearyouth.org.

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