

JPPS students' reflect on less fortunate during silence

By JANICE ARNOLD
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It might have been a Victorian's dream: a roomful of kids and the only sounds were papers rustling, pencils rattling and seats creaking.

These 75 children seen and not heard are Grade 6 students at Jewish People's and Peretz Schools (JPPS). Most have two pieces of black tape in an X over their mouths, as they busily go about the lunchroom making inspirational posters, recording their thoughts in online journals and scribbling slogans like "Never give up" on the Smartboard.

Their assignment was to stay silent for the entire morning – four hours – in order to reflect on the fact that many children around the world do not have the freedom of expression or other rights they take for granted.

It was also a lesson in the importance of speaking up for justice, and that one voice, even their own, can make a difference.

The project, conceived by teachers Sheila Perry and Jennifer Nyman, went by the code name MOSAIK (Morning of Silence/Action is Key).

"By committing themselves to an entire morning without voices, our Grade 6 students have a glimpse into the situation of millions of children worldwide who aren't being heard," said JPPS vice-principal Debra Michael.

Perry said the students were also reminded that some children here, such as the poor, the abused and the variously challenged, are often

unheard.

The experience was "empowering," she said, because it demonstrated to the youngsters that if they could contain their normally gregarious, even boisterous, natures for a few hours for the sake of a cause they can probably do a lot more. They served as role models for the younger children,

who were required to stay quiet when they passed the lunchroom. The teachers also kept their verbal communication minimal.

The JPPS website carried a live feed of the lunchroom and the blogs the students kept.

Several guest speakers addressed the hushed audience.

The first was Justin Trudeau, who in a couple of days would win the federal Liberal nomination in Papineau riding.

Trudeau, 35, a former schoolteacher, said that having been in the spotlight all his life as former prime minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau's eldest son had taught him early on the power of speech and the necessity of using it wisely.

He said he was raised in a home where the



JPPS Grade 6 students Stephen Goldstein, left, and Bruce Turriff record their experience of keeping silent for an entire morning on a live blog.

get this attention. It made me think, OK, maybe this is not fair, but I have this voice and I have the choice to use it or not for things I think are important. I realized I had to make sure I had something worthwhile to say."

His advice to the students was to understand the power of their own voices and the responsibility that comes with that.

"I was born into 24 Sussex Dr. I had a fabulous father and an amazing mom, who shared their passion for the world. I had a great education, I got to travel the world. I met kings and queens and people selling their wares in Africa. I've had great luck and privilege."

But he reminded the JPPS students that living in Canada is "the greatest luck of all" and many

children's opinions were valued, and he was not afraid to disagree with his parents.

"Later in life, I realized that because of my last name, when I spoke up about a cause, people listened. I could call a press conference and people showed up and broadcast what I said... If I was Justin Tremblay, I would not

children in the world are not as fortunate.

He promised to answer their e-mailed questions because none could be taken from the floor.

Notre-Dame-de-Grace-Lachine MP Marlene Jennings, the Liberal's justice critic and the first black woman from Quebec elected to the House of Commons, and Dean Smith of the Trevor Williams Foundation, which works with marginalized youngsters, also spoke later.

The students also listened to Melissa Etheridge's recording of *I Need to Wake Up*, the Academy Award-winning song from Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth* and were asked to write down what they thought the lyrics meant.

They also had articles to read about people, some their own age, who are helping others, and ideas about what they can do now from volunteering to clean up of the neighbourhood to writing to the Laotian president urging him to free four students jailed who pressed for greater access to education.

The children were encouraged to put what they had learned into action. They started a school-supply drive and a petition in favour of education for women and girls in Afghanistan.

That afternoon, on their own time, they visited three non-profit organizations to hear about volunteering opportunities for next year when they are in high school: the Starlight Foundation, Sun Youth Organization and Maimonides Geriatric Centre.

To encourage them, the students' family and friends sponsor their morning of silence, and they will decide where the funds will go.