

# Crew chief gets kids fired up to follow dreams

HANNAH PIECUCH  
hpiecuch@ricentral.com

COVENTRY — When an assembly line accident took his vision, smell and taste, Jay Blake refused to let it stop him. After years of following his dreams, he is now the only blind crew chief of a drag racing team.

As a special guest at Coventry High School this Thursday, Blake told students that he accomplished his dreams through his positive attitude, strong basic skills, passion, self-determination and the ability to work as a team member.

Automotive Technology Teacher Jim Thompson invited Blake in hopes of inspiring his students, he said. "There's a sense of apathy in this town, a sense of entitlement. I'm having my students build a racecar and they aren't even excited about it."

Because of Blake's message about following your dreams, Thompson hoped

**It can still be frightening to be unable to see, Blake answered. But he told students that he can't let fear stop him and they shouldn't either.**

that meeting him in person and hearing him speak would stir up not only the career and tech students but the whole student body.

About half the high school showed up to hear Blake speak, filling the high school auditorium.

As he told the story of his accident, his recovery at the Carroll Center for the Blind in Newton, Massachusetts, Blake affirmed the importance of doing good work in high school to lay the foundation for pursuing dreams in the future.

"In high school all I wanted to do was work on cars," he said. "After I graduated I realized that all the other things I was supposed to be learning really mat-

tered."

On May 22, 1997, Blake was the head mechanic of a transportation company on Cape Cod. He went to work that day, like any other day, he said.

That day a forklift wheel and tire assembly line blew up in his face. The explosion blew him 40 feet backwards and he was rushed to Massachusetts General Hospital where the doctors worked on him for ten hours.

They tried to save one eye but in the end had to reconstruct his whole face and give him prosthetic eyes. The assembly of high school students fell silent as Blake told his story.

After his accident Blake had to relearn everything. At the Carroll Center he learned how to care for himself and how to read Braille. During that time, he was asked to write a paper about his dream career.

See **SPEAKER**, Page A-3



Hannah Piecuch • Daily Times

Claiming that his students weren't even excited to be building their own racecar, Automotive Technology Teacher Jim Thompson invited Jay Blake, the only blind crew chief of a drag racing team, to speak to the students about his experiences.



# Speaker inspires at CHS

*Continued from Page A-1*

“So I wrote the same paper that I had been writing since fourth grade,” he said. “I wrote it, handed it in and never acted on it. I never lost the dream but I never did anything about it.”

Shortly after he wrote the paper, some of the staff at the Carroll center took him to a racetrack. “My heart was pounding, my adrenaline was pulsing and I decided then and there that I was going to go for it and make it happen.”

Over the next few years everyone thought he was crazy, Blake said. He met with business people to learn about the market, he went back to school, he asked his older brother to be the driver of his car and in 1999 Blake purchased the first car for his team and established a non-profit called “Follow a Dream.”

He started out without any money, Blake said, but he had the positive attitude, strong basic skills, passion,

self-determination and the ability to work as a team member to make it possible.

Now, ten years later, he heads a ten-member team that races a 2009 Chevy Impala SS that runs on methanol. It has an eight cylinder engine and 3,000 horsepower. It can go from a standing stop to 250 mph in five seconds. Blake came to Coventry on his way home from a drag race in Georgia, he said.

After he spoke, students were eager to ask questions.

“How does it feel now that you have accomplished your dream even though you’re blind,” one young man asked.

He has only accomplished part of his dream, Blake said. But he hopes that other people won’t have to get hit in the head as hard as he did in order to chase their dreams.

It can still be frightening to be unable to see, Blake answered in response to another question about how long it took him to get used

to being blind. But he told students that he can’t let fear stop him and they shouldn’t either.

Finally, someone asked what everyone had been thinking: “have you ever driven a racecar?”

Not the one that he brought to the high school, Blake said. But he’s driven the trailer that it came in. “And we’re going to take the very first car that I got and go down to the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah so I can become the fastest blind man in the world. I’m going to drive there alone in the car with no one else with me.”

He’s about ready to start practicing, Blake added, so students should stay tuned for when it happens.

After his presentation, students surrounded the car, which was parked outside the high school to get a closer look.

More information about Blake and Follow a Dream are available at [www.followadream.org](http://www.followadream.org).