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FEATURED

Tiogue Elementary goes black and white for omphalocele awareness

By KENDRA GRAVELLE
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Students in Daye Citrone’s kindergarten class at Tiogue Elementary School pose for a picture Friday wearing black and white in honor of International Omphalocele Awareness Day.

COVENTRY — Tiogue Elementary School was painted black and white on Friday. And at the center of it all, wearing black and white polish on her fingernails and a sparkly barrette bearing the omphalocele ribbon in her hair, was Paige Alston.

"We said [to Paige], 'what do you want to do?' And she said she wanted to have a party," Daye Citrone, Paige's teacher, said of the five-year-old as she and her classmates marched down the hallway seeking clues during a scavenger hunt.

Paige was born with omphalocele, an abdominal wall defect that caused several of her organs to develop outside her body. It's been a long road, but today — with her family, the staff at Hasbro Children's Hospital, and the entire Tiogue Elementary School community behind her — the kindergartener is thriving.

To pay tribute to just how far Paige has come, nearly every student and staff member at the school wore the signature colors of omphalocele awareness on Friday, International Omphalocele Awareness Day.

And if anyone happened to forget what day it was, Paige was quick to remind them, "It's my special day."

"It's just nice to support all of our students," Principal Domenic Giusti said, dressed in a black-and-white polo shirt. "And [Paige] is just so special. She's such a brave little girl and she's been through so much."

Similar sentiments were expressed by many.

"She's a miracle kid," Gina D'Aguanno, a nurse teacher at Tiogue Elementary School. "She's very lucky to be alive."

Paige over the years has undergone 26 procedures — including open-heart surgery — related to both the omphalocele and a case of pulmonary hypertension that developed soon after she was born.

The Coventry native kept her head up through it all, and in 2018 was named the Children's Miracle Network Hospitals' Rhode Island Champion.

"She's got a lot of differences," D'Aguanno said. "Most people go through their whole entire lives and don't have the struggles that this kid has had in five years. Her resilience is amazing."

D'Aguanno said her hope Friday was for Paige to feel celebrated. Likewise, she added, it's important for all students at the elementary school to feel included.

Inspired by the program at Coventry High School, Tiogue Elementary School this year implemented its own unified program, Giusti said. Around 40 students currently participate in the program, which rotates among different sports and activities.

"We want to recognize everybody's differences," Giusti said, adding that everyone in the school will take the "Unified Pledge" when they return from February vacation.

Moving forward, Giusti added that he plans to hold other celebrations similar to the one last week to recognize students facing a range of disorders and illnesses.

As Paige and her classmates continued their scavenger hunt Friday, following clues to various classrooms throughout the building, a surprise was awaiting them in their own classroom. Cow-print pennant banners lined the white board; star-shaped balloons floated above tables; black-and-white streamers spiraled from one ceiling tile to another.

And then in walked the students, each wearing black and white clothing and cow-print headbands. A chorus of "woah" and "oh my gosh" rang out as they entered to find the decked-out room.

Citrone said it was "amazing" to see how students in all grades embraced Omphalocele Awareness Day and to witness their thoughtful interactions with Paige.

For the students in Citrone's class, Friday's celebration lasted the entire day and wrapped up with a dance party, per Paige's request. But the students didn't move to just any song.

"I wanted to do the Fight Song for Paige," Penelope Smeals said, sitting across from her friend Paige at a table laid with a cow-print tablecloth. "Because when she was little she was getting stronger."

"She said, 'how about a dance party?'" Citrone chimed in. "And [Penelope] said, 'how about the Fight Song so we can all be strong like Paige?'"

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