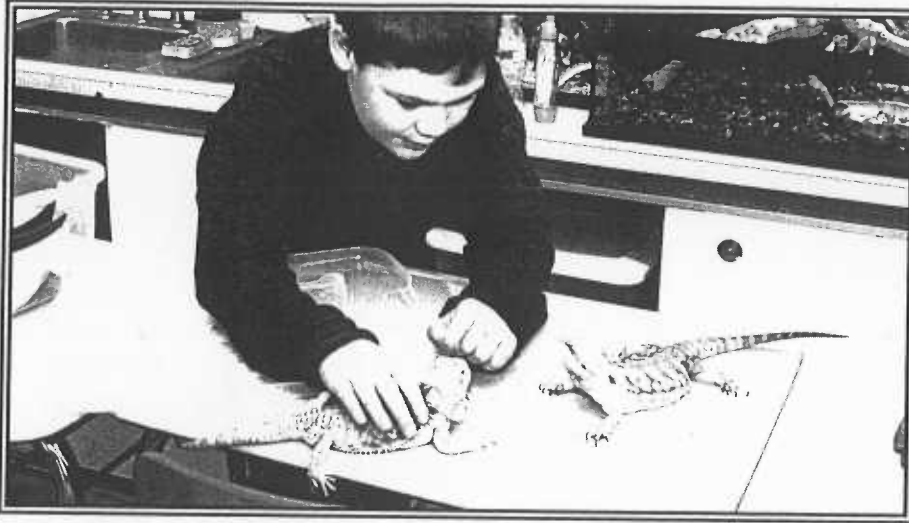


The Carmel Schoolhouse News

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Teaching Children; Building Futures



GFMS student Colin Fleischman recently brought his adopted pet, Lightening, to school to get reacquainted with Keith Tucci's bearded dragon, Boli. Lightening's calm nature helped Colin through a difficult time last school year.

A love of reptiles and a set of twins make a lasting difference for one young boy at GMFS

Moving up from elementary to middle school is a big step on the road to maturity for any child. It's both exciting and anxiety-ridden. It was those things for Colin Fleischman too. But for him, the transition was even more daunting. That's because Colin has Tourette Syndrome (TS)—a little understood neurological disorder, characterized by sudden jerking movements and uncontrollable tics and vocalizations.

Colin's mom Kerry Fleischman, describes him as a boy who is intelligent and loves school. Yet, she said, "The move from 4th to 5th grade was very difficult for Colin and his Tourette's began to manifest more often." Determined to help their son, Kerry and her husband Ralph engaged teachers, support staff and administrators at the school on a number of fronts. In addition to finding the right academic setting, the Fleischman's worked to help others understand TS. "We wanted the school community to know more about Tourette," Kerry said. Student Ambassadors from the Tourette Association of America came to

the school to talk about TS with GFMS students; professional development was provided for staff; and a seminar was held for parents. "All that was accomplished during the school year was unbelievable!" Mrs. Fleischman remarked.

What really moved the dial for Colin, however, was a connection with a bearded dragon and the care and compassion of twin brothers, Mark and Keith Tucci, who also happen to be educators in the school. Mark is a guidance counselor and Keith teaches fifth grade.

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Grants support what's best for kids

It's no secret that funding for schools is tight these days. In recent years school districts across New York have struggled to maintain fiscal balance in the midst of rising costs and declining economic conditions. Carmel is no exception. For that reason, to supplement programs that are best for our students, staff throughout the District are actively pursuing grant opportunities wherever and whenever possible.

Several efforts have been successful. Here are three recent grant awards and a description of how the money, goods and services have/will be used.

- Grant: 2016 Rookie Grant
Awards: \$10,000 and \$6,000 (of the \$6,000 grant, \$4,000 is for competitions in 2016 and \$2,000 for 2017).
School: Carmel High School – Robotics Team



CHS technology teacher Don Saldicco (l) and Global Foundries engineer, Mr. Glenn Stefanski were pleased to accept a \$10,000 Rookie Grant from FIRST Robotics.

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A love of reptiles...

As Colin's guidance counselor, Mark Tucci took an early interest in the particular issues associated with TS and sought ways to help Colin adjust to life in the middle school, both academically and socially. With support from the district and John Piscitella (GMFS principal), Mark organized the Student Ambassador assemblies, the professional development and the parent seminar. "All these activities brought our TS community closer together too," said Mrs. Fleischman. "We discovered many other children in our district with TS—many of whom have become good friends. These kids now know they are not alone and they support each other," she added. Mark also worked closely with Colin's parents, teachers and other support staff to acclimate Colin. Mrs. Fleischman summarized, "Everything that was done, especially in bringing awareness of TS would not have been possible without Mark's support and help."

"The Student Ambassador assembly went a long way in helping students understand Colin's condition," Mark recalled. "After listening to others with TS, our students had many great questions. They really wanted to understand."

It was during the Student Ambassador assembly that Keith Tucci and the bearded dragon came into the picture. "Colin was having a terrible time with tics during the assembly," said Mrs. Fleischman, who was there as a representative of Tourette Association of America. "So much so, Colin left the auditorium and went into the restroom in the fifth grade hall."

Keith Tucci, who was not Colin's teacher at the time, heard Colin and went to see if he could help. "I started to talk to him to see if I could calm him down. I brought him into my classroom. I asked him if he liked animals and I showed him my class reptiles," he went on. Colin was drawn to the bearded dragon, "Lightening." After handling Lightening for a few minutes,



Mark and Keith Tucci were instrumental in bringing awareness of Tourette Syndrome to GMFS students and staff. It all came about because of one student, Colin Fleischman, and the connections they made through their love of reptiles.

Colin was much better and Keith let him return to the assembly with the dragon. "Colin was so focused on the dragon at that point, he didn't tic for the rest of the assembly!" said Keith.

After discovering this connection with the reptile, Colin's team of teachers (Michelle Smith and Deanna Balascio) let Colin visit Lightening when his tics began to manifest. They also allowed Colin to bring the dragon to class with him in a traveling cage. "It worked for a while," Mrs. Fleischman said.

"The novelty wore off after a while though and Colin began to miss class because of his TS," Mark continued. Colin was often asked to step out of the classroom. There were many days too, when Colin could not attend school and was home-instructed.

As the Fleischman's and school staff sought ways to keep Colin in school, Keith, with the support of Michelle Smith

and Deanna Balascio, suggested Colin transfer into his class. He explained, "I figured, he liked my class reptiles and came to visit often. He was also familiar with several kids in my class, so why not give it a try?" Before the final decision to move Colin however, Keith talked to his class and asked them how they felt about having Colin in the class. "I was honest and told them that there would probably be times when Colin would tic and possibly disrupt the class. But my class was really behind the idea. They were very welcoming," he said.

Mrs. Fleischman agreed and commented, "The kids in Keith's class were wonderful. Colin felt wanted and accepted."

"Once Colin joined the class, there were a couple of times when he would begin to tic," Keith said. "I could see that he was worried he'd be asked to leave. But I told him, 'You're not leaving, even if you're ticking.' I saw him visibly relax when I said that. I think it was a turning point for him. His concern about being asked to leave was alleviated. After that I remember only two days when he was not in class."

"We all learned a lot about Colin last year," said Mrs. Fleischman. While thankful for every effort made on Colin's behalf, Mrs. Fleischman particularly credits the Tucci brothers and said, "Keith and Mark stood by our side through thick and thin. They fought for Colin. Colin felt he was the only one that mattered because of the Tucci's. They are truly advocates for all children who learn differently. They are amazing and wonderful role models."

Keith and Mark are quick to share credit, however, and said it was a collective effort to help Colin stay in school and do

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A love of reptiles...

well. "We had a combination of support for Colin, including the help of the school psychologist Dr. Dawn Gorlitsky, the reptiles, the class accepting him, and the awareness programs," described Mark. "We also developed a relationship with both Colin and his parents," he continued.

The Tucci's also helped to ensure that Colin continues to progress in school. This year, Colin is in the school's Bridge program and is doing well. "The Tucci's helped make a solid plan for Colin and the Bridge program has created a home for him," said Mrs. Fleischman.

"Last year was a learning experience for many of us. Teachers, students and administrators all benefitted from getting to know Colin, other students with TS and seeing the Tourette Association presentation that Mark and Keith help organize," said GFMS Principal John Piscitella.

In addition to the accolades from Mrs. Fleischman, this past fall the Tucci brothers were recognized by the Tourette Association New York Hudson Valley Chapter. In announcing the award, Helene Walisever, Chair of the chapter said the Tucci's, "have both demonstrated exceptional understanding, excellence in teaching, and unparalleled compassion towards the education of students touched by Tourette Syndrome."

Humbled by the award, Keith and Mark turned the spotlight on Colin. Keith said, "It's not about us, it's about Colin. Sure, there was a lot of trial and error, but we learned more from Colin than he learned from us. He has great perseverance and determination to be in school and do well."

Mark agreed and added, "Our biggest reward is that Colin is doing well."

Congratulations to Keith and Mark Tucci. A pair of brothers who truly understand what's best for kids! #BestForKids.

Do you believe in fate? A case of Lightning striking twice!

Lightning may look like an ordinary bearded dragon, but his powerful pull makes for an extraordinary tale. If you believe that things happen for a reason, you'll understand why Lightning ended up in Keith Tucci's classroom. "It's no secret that I love reptiles," he began. "I already had another bearded dragon and some snakes." So, when an acquaintance, Dean Stitchbury from Camp Herrlich asked if Keith could take care of Lightning, Keith did not hesitate.

Lightning's calming effect on Colin Fleischman was timely and life-changing for Colin. It was no surprise then that Colin asked to take Lightning home for the summer at the end of last school-year. "Since Lightning wasn't mine, I asked Dean if Colin could take care of the animal," Keith explained. But Lightning didn't really belong to Dean Stitchbury or Camp Herrlich—he happened to belong to a guest counselor from England. Mr. Stitchbury contacted the former counselor to seek permission for Colin to house the reptile. After hearing Colin's story, the former counselor replied back with a quick and enthusiastic "YES" to Colin's request. As it turned out, the former counselor also has Tourette Syndrome and the bearded dragon once helped her deal with her condition too. Now that's simply kismet!

What parents of children with Tourette Syndrome want you to know

Colin Fleischman is not the first or only student in Carmel to have Tourette Syndrome. Awareness and understanding are key. The following list is excerpted from "8 Things Parents of Kids With Tourette's Syndrome Want You to Know," published online on The Huffington Post, by Rebecca Adams, on May 20, 2015.

1. Tourette syndrome (TS) is not uncommon. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 1 in every 360 children between the ages of 6 and 17 has a TS diagnosis.
2. For the most part, people with TS don't shout obscenities.
3. In fact, not all kids with TS have the same symptoms. Tics, or "Repetitive, stereotyped, involuntary movements and vocalizations," can take all kinds of forms. Often, these symptoms wax and wane with no predictability.
4. Oftentimes, children with TS are also dealing with mental health conditions such as ADHD, anxiety and/or obsessive-compulsive disorder.
5. People with TS aren't doing these things for attention—they actually can't help it.
6. TS isn't an intellectual disability.
7. It isn't helpful if a teacher stops everything when a child experiences tics.
8. Kids with TS aren't any different than other kids.

For more information on TS, visit <http://tsa-nyhv.org>