

LEARNING

PCS students win Don Johnston award for film

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POMFRET — As a child, Don Johnston was eager to learn. Learning, though, proved a challenge for him when he began struggling to learn to read.

Johnston was ridiculed by teachers who accused him of being a troublemaker and not paying attention. He found himself looking for ways to get out of reading out loud in class, such as tripping over other students so he'd get sent out of the room. One particular teacher, Mrs. Arns, proved to be the worst when it came to understanding.

In eighth grade, Johnston was placed in the classroom of Mrs. Tedesco, a teacher who believed in him and helped him on the path to success. Johnston even developed a method to help him remember what he had learned and, by the ninth grade, knew how to read.

Johnston — the owner of Don Johnson Inc. in Illinois — has published his story in an autobiography called *Building Wings* in the hopes of helping all children to understand that everyone learns differently. It was his story that inspired the students who use the Resource Room at Pomfret Community School to share theirs.

"They basically took Don's story and made it their own," said fifth- and sixth-grade special education teacher Linda Bates.

Last year, the students, then in grades five to eight, read the book and entered a film contest that brought Johnston's story to life; they recently received news that they won.

Bates said participating in the contest was a spur-of-the-moment decision, as she and EastConn Assistant Technology Coordinator Carol Magliocco found out about it while surfing the Internet.

When the students learned of the contest,



Chenoa Pierce photo

These are all of the stars of the PCS Building Wings Readers Theater, who pose with a copy of Don Johnston's book *Building Wings* in front of their success board.

they were very enthusiastic about participating, especially because many of them could relate and have called *Building Wings* their favorite book.

"It's the best book I ever read," said student Nick Simpson, who was one of the film's illustrators.

"I'm so glad I read it because it's a good book and helped me understand a lot about people," said Michael Pahlas.

The students had a hand in just about every part of the film. They took turns playing the different characters and helped out with the illustrations.

"Everybody got to play a part," said Bates.

Even some of the parents and teachers got

involved in the project when they found out about it.

In addition to the film, the students put together a success board based on Johnston's "We can do it!" message that documents their achievements. They also got a chance to meet with Johnston's son Kevin to talk with him about his father's story. According to Bates, Magliocco initiated that meeting.

"She [Magliocco] really introduced us to Kevin Johnston," she said.

When the film was completed, the stars of the film got the red carpet treatment and invited their parents, grandparents, siblings and friends to attend a premiere held at the school.

When asked if they had fun working on the

film, the answer was a resounding, unanimous "yes!"

Because they won the contest, each student who participated received an autographed copy of *Building Wings* to keep and a certificate of their achievement. The school also won \$400 worth of Johnston's "Start to Finish" books, which come with computer reading software and include such titles as *The Call of the Wild* and *Julius Caesar*. In addition, the film will debut at a conference in Chicago and the students are hoping to be able to share it with their peers.

"This is a group of students who hardly get recognized and this gave them" a chance to shine, said Bates proudly.

"They are very proud of themselves," said eighth-grade teaching assistant and parent Lisa Andrews.

Bates said the video is going to be posted on <http://www.donjohnston.com> sometime in the coming weeks.

The students involved in the film were Chris Peck, Aaron DeGaetano, Claire Sconzo, Miranda Brown, Dan Butkevich, Hunter Collins, Michael Pahlas, Austin Dean, Phoebe Reagan, Giovanni Bernadone, Dan Cournoyer, Julia Fulford, Pat Clarke, Amanda DeMaire, Kayla DeMaire and Ashley Cournoyer.

Faculty and staff who contributed, in addition to Bates and Magliocco, were Andrews, seventh- and eighth-grade special education teacher Steve Guillbault, sixth-grade teaching assistant Martin Marley, teaching assistant Amy Bowen, and fifth-grade teaching assistant Susan Burkhardt and Nick Simpson's mother.

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