

Handicapped children Brittle bones, brave heart

Rare illness doesn't faze Soquel boy

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CAPITOLA — Bobby Easley sat in his motorized wheelchair in front of 220 sixth-grade classmates at New Brighton Middle School and said, "I've broken over 350 bones in my body."

Bobby has what is commonly called brittle bone disease.

"When you're around me you shouldn't throw balls, because one year I had a ball thrown at me and broke my hand," he said.

Bobby, who will be 12 next month, addressed three separate assemblies of sixth, seventh and eighth graders at the school Friday.

Part of the reason that Bobby got center stage was for his own protection; his classmates will hopefully be careful around him, now knowing about his condition.

The other part was demonstrating his adroit sense of humor, which will help the other children to feel more comfortable around him too.

"Any handicapped person doesn't like it if you stare at them," said Bobby. "So don't stare at me or I'll come up to you and say, 'Hi.'"

Bobby cannot walk, but he is adept at maneuvering his wheelchair around the school. His head is of average sixth-grade size, yet his limbs are small enough to fit into his chair.

But what stands out about Bobby is that he is a sharp boy who knows himself and his condition well.

"I have osteo genesis imperfecta," Bobby told his classmates, explaining that osteo means bones, genesis has to do with genetic make up, and imperfecta, obviously, means imperfect.

Bobby said that one in 100,000 people are carriers for brittle bone disease, but only "one in 100,000 squared" actually contract it.



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Bobby Easley, afflicted with a rare bone disease, has suffered more than 350 broken bones.

One teacher asked what would happen if a student came up and grabbed him by the arm to talk to him.

"You have to be real careful because I could break something," he said.

"I used to break more easily," Bobby said. "But I'll never outgrow it totally."

He's a popular boy around the school, which has been in session three days. In fact, when Dave Schumaker, principal of New Brighton, asked how many of the students at the first assembly knew him, about 80 percent raised their hands.

Schumaker said that about a third of the sixth-graders went to school with Bobby at Santa Cruz Gardens Elementary School.

Bobby's mother, Laurie Easley, said he attended handicapped schools since he was 2 months old, until halfway through kindergarten. Bobby was then transferred to public school and has been part of the mainstream ever since.

They live at the Villa San Carlos Apartments in Soquel with Bobby's baby brother, Michael. His mother helps him out at home. But, said Bob-

by, "I'm real independent."

At school, he gets help from Socorro Ortiz, who has been Bobby's aide for a year and a half.

"He's great. He's such a neat kid," said Ortiz, whose salary is paid by the school.

"But I've been nervous for three days that someone playing rough near him will hurt him. But he's growing up," she said proudly.

Schumaker ended the first assembly by telling Bobby's classmates, "Bobby is one of us, so go up to him and say, 'Hi.'"