Middle School Newspaper Seeks Hero Journalists

When sixth grader Chris Moran first learned that the Mahopac Middle School newspaper, The Torch, was looking for student reporters and editors, he was curious, but not convinced it was the after-school club for him.

“I thought I’d wait and see,” said Chris, who is 12. “Some of my friends joined, but that’s not what made me join. It was when I saw the first edition. I said ‘Oh, this is cool.’ I really liked the movie reviews. I want to write movie reviews, so here I am.”

That is pretty much the reaction that The Torch newspaper advisor David Gordon was aiming for. Gordon took over leadership of The Torch this year and saw it as an opportunity to update the publication.

“We are in the process of trying to make a newspaper that the kids themselves would be interested in reading,” said Gordon, an eighth-grade social studies teacher. “We’ll publish reviews of movies, books and games, maybe write about new businesses in town and spotlight somebody the kids think is interesting. This has to come from them.”

Gordon recruited Michael Woodrow, another eighth-grade social studies teacher, to be co-advisor.

“We really are trying to create a culture, a community with a mission,” Woodrow said. “We wanted to make them feel like they are part of something big.”

The club launched in the third week in September. Students who signed up got a Torch lapel pin and a press pass that allows them to use their phones in school to take photos if they are working on a story.

The first issue was published in November. At 16 pages, it included a poem, story and drawings by Mia Panebianco, who had just moved to Mahopac in February, and an editorial by Kylie Quackenbush, the pop culture editor, who asked “Is cereal soup?”

“That’s a popular debate right now,” she said.

Roma McConnell and Jackson Spedaliere interviewed Mahopac Schools Superintendent Anthony DiCarlo, who recently announced that he will retire in June.

“I was nervous at the start,” Roma said. “I learned a lot about what he does from talking to him. I learned that he is in charge of a lot of people. We learned a lot about the importance of decisions we make now, and how they can affect our future.”

The kickoff issue also included an inspiring frontpage story by advisor David Gordon that called journalists heroes, quoted the Washington Post’s slogan “Democracy Dies in Darkness,” and referenced mild-mannered reporter Clark Kent, as well as muckrakers like Nellie Bly and novelist Upton Sinclair.
“Our world needs heroes like Upton Sinclair and Nellie Bly as much as we needed them one hundred years ago,” Gordon wrote. “The Mahopac Middle School encourages students to join the ranks of the heroes who came before them.”

Judging by the group of enthusiastic students who attended a meeting in early December, The Torch will have no shortage of heroes.