

Understanding Disabilities, Inc.
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

KAREN GAFFNEY SPEAKS TO READING COMMUNITY

In one of their Understanding Disabilities classes, Reading fourth-graders see a short film about a woman's historic swim across Lake Tahoe. The swim was made by Karen Gaffney, a woman with Down syndrome. Gaffney, an accomplished long-distance swimmer, is also president of the Karen Gaffney Foundation, an organization dedicated to changing attitudes toward people with developmental disabilities.

Now Karen Gaffney is coming to Reading. She will be addressing students at the Coolidge and Parker Middle Schools and will be speaking to the community, with a different presentation, on Wed. March 3 at 7 PM in the Parker Middle School auditorium.

In her evening presentation, called "Re-writing the Data," Gaffney will discuss how people can overcome limitations. The presentation is free of charge and all are invited to attend.

Gaffney is being brought to Reading by Understanding Disabilities, Inc., a 25-year-old educational program with a mission of helping students of the Reading Public Schools see beyond people's disabilities and focus on the ways we are all alike inside.

In addition to her 9-mile swim across Lake Tahoe, Gaffney has also swum the English Channel as part of a relay team and recently swam Boston Harbor.

“All will be moved by Karen's story,” says Ruth Clogston, Program Director of Understanding Disabilities. “People who have struggled to overcome difficulties of any kind will find inspiration in what she has to say.”

Local parents of children with Down syndrome especially look forward to Gaffney's appearance. “Karen is an inspiration to every parent of a child with Down syndrome,” says Kate Connors, an Understanding Disabilities volunteer who has taught the program's Developmental Disabilities unit and whose son, Patrick, has Down syndrome.

Lisa Gibbs, whose daughter Sam has Down syndrome, is also pleased about Gaffney's appearance. “Karen coming to speak in Reading is yet another opportunity for our community to glean understanding about the depth and breadth of people who have disabilities,” Gibbs says.

Gibbs and her husband Rob founded Samantha's Harvest, an organization that provides funding for programs and organizations that enhance the lives of people with Down syndrome. Samantha's Harvest is one of the organizations helping to fund Gaffney's appearances.

Other sponsors include the Coolidge and Parker Middle School PTOs, Reading Pupil Services, and a Private Donor.

Karen's appearance is part of the Reading Public Schools' “Celebration of Inclusive Schools,” a series of plays, performances, speaker sessions, and a workshop presented to the public and to the town's middle and high school students.

Those involved with Understanding Disabilities are excited about the Celebration and about Gaffney's visit. Especially excited are those who have talked to schoolchildren about Karen's historic swim.

“We were excited when Karen swam Boston Harbor this fall and we could tell the children

about it,” says Clogston. “Some of them had seen it on the local news. Now Karen is coming to Reading.”

“She's changing attitudes and helping to change lives,” she adds.

For further information, contact Understanding Disabilities at UD@reading.k12.ma.us.