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Stars of hit movie 'Wonder' make surprise visit in Hanover

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HANOVER — The fifth-grade students had just finished watching a clip from "Wonder," a hit 2017 movie featuring actors Bryce Gheisar, Jacob Tremblay and Noah Jupe, when the principal of Hanover Middle School announced that he had a surprise.

"Guess what? They're here," Daniel Birolini said to gasps of disbelief as the three young men walked into the gymnasium. "We have them here, at Hanover Middle School."

The star's surprise appearance at the school Wednesday marked the climax of "Wonder Fair," a celebration of kindness that was inspired by the movie and preceding book, which Hanover fifth-graders had been reading. At other times during the half-day event, students took turns at eight stations designed to give them a sense of what it would be like to live with hearing and vision loss, learning disabilities, social and emotional anxiety, physical disabilities and

attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

“The hope is that it opens up a conversation and creates an inclusive environment,” said teacher Tom Hogan. “Throughout the year they reflect on this, and teachers bring it up.”

“Wonder,” based on the popular R.J. Palacio novel about a fifth-grader ostracized by his classmates because of a severe facial deformity, was the sleeper hit of last year, earning more than \$300 million worldwide. The book, which came out five years earlier, has sold more than 5 million copies and sparked the #ChooseKind movement, a campaign built on the book’s message about tolerance and acceptance.

The movie was released in theaters this last November and starred Oscar-winner Julia Roberts, Owen Wilson, Daveed Diggs and Mandy Patinkin. Tremblay played the main character, August “Auggie” Pullman, while Jupe was his best friend, Jack Will, and Gheisar portrayed the bully, Julian.

While students were eating lunch, the three actors were able to experience the fair’s activities for themselves, performing tasks on laptops while being distracted to simulate having learning disabilities and trying to put papers into a three-ring binder while blindfolded to simulate being blind.

“The Wonder Fair today, I think it’s a good way to be able to see through other people’s eyes if you don’t have a person with disabilities in your school to be able to see their differences,” Gheisar said.

Students had been told there would be surprise guest speakers but staff kept the identities of the guests secret. After their surprise introduction, Gheisar, Tremblay and Jupe told the students about their experiences making the movie and what the story taught them.

“In school, you kind of just judge somebody by either their looks or the way that you first meet, you don’t really get a chance to get to know somebody before you actually judge them for who they are,” Gheisar said. “If you really take a chance on somebody and take a chance to get to know them before judging them, I think that’s a really good message to take away.”

Standing in the front of the packed gymnasium, the three young men also

answered questions from students about what it was like to play their respective roles, if they had to go to school while filming the movie and how Jupe, who is from England, is able to speak in an American accent while acting.

One student also asked Gheisar what it was like to play a bully.

"On set, sometimes it kind of feels real because of the sets that they made, it felt like I was in a real school, so saying these things, I mean, I felt really bad saying them. I felt like I had to apologize sometimes," Gheisar said.

Gheisar, Tremblay and Jupe were presented with a collection of Hanover gear, including hats, which they all donned after they finished speaking.

The actors took a group photo with the students, teachers and parent volunteers, as well as some selfies. They were then the first people to sign the fifth grade's "Kindness Pledge," a banner that reads, "Choose kind," and was later signed by the entire grade.

Tremblay's final message to the students reiterated the message of "Wonder."

"To quote the movie, when given the choice of being right or being kind, choose kind," Tremblay said.