

Good morning everyone. It is my privilege to be in front of such an awesome cast of characters to talk about character. For those of you who don't know me, I'm Mr. Johnson and I teach 7th and 8th grade English as well as Communications. Additionally, with my co-ringmaster Ms. Gravelle, I run a 3 ring circus that I like to call Learning Strategies.

For my 7th and 8th grade students, I'd be willing to bet there's a grammar warmup that has all the different definitions of the word "character" on it, which, honestly, would be kind of helpful right about now. But since this assembly got us all out of class, we'll just talk about character instead, although if anybody wants the grammar warm up anyway, feel free to stop by Room 4...after donuts of course.

I want to start by telling you about this game I started playing with a friend of mine when we're out in public. We don't have a name for the game yet, but here's how it works: whenever we see someone do something that appears rude or inconsiderate, instead of getting annoyed or frustrated, we say, "Whelp, guess that person's the main character and the rest of us are just NPCs."

NPC is a term you hear thrown around in video games. It stands for non-player character. An NPC is anyone in the video game that isn't your character. And in video games, you can treat the NPCs however you want

because they aren't real people. And if you mess something up, like maybe an NPC who joined you for a quest gets lost somewhere along the way, all you need to do is pause the game, reload the game from the last point you saved, and you literally get a fresh start with that NPC.

Real life isn't like that. Just because we are the main character in our life story, doesn't mean the people around us aren't also the main characters of *their* life stories. Life isn't a video game. If we say or do something that hurts another person, you can't just turn the game off and try again. And I think developing into a person with good moral character starts with holding ourselves to a certain standard of behavior and treating others and ourselves with decency and respect, so not the way many of us treat the NPCs in a video game.

When I was in the Boy Scouts, we recited what's called the Scout Law at the beginning of every meeting. We'd make the Scout sign and say, "A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent." But I don't think many of the guys, at least in my patrol, really thought any deeper about those words than just memorizing them to advance in rank. Looking back, I struggle with 2 words in the Scout Law. The first is the word "Law." The implication of that word is that there are consequences for disobeying that law. But is

there any among us who can say they are all those adjectives I just listed *all the time*? The second word I struggle with is the word "is", "A Scout *is* trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly..." so on and so forth. No one is ever helpful *all the time* or friendly *all the time*. Based on how many people have been sick from this school, I can say for a fact none of us are clean all the time, despite Mr. I telling us every morning to wash our hands. The point is, we're always learning, always making mistakes, and that's just a part of being human.

The students recognized today and those who have earned a Star of Character in the past aren't representative of attaining perfect moral character or achieving Trustworthiness or Citizenship or so on from this point forward and for the rest of their lives forever and ever. Earning a Star of Character shows that you made a deliberate effort to improve an aspect of yourself. And to do this means you stopped thinking about just yourself, the main character, and made conscious choices to recognize the humanity of others, to not treat them like an NPC, but to treat them how you'd want to be treated.

This isn't always an easy task. Sometimes even when you give the world the best you've got, the world doesn't always give you its best in return. But I challenge you, even when it feels like there's no payoff for

having good character, for doing the right thing, I challenge you to be your best self every day. To do the right thing because it's the right thing to do.

I want to pass on a bit of wisdom from the Roman emperor and philosopher Marcus Aurelius. He wrote, "Be strict with yourself and tolerant of others." You can control yourself, but not other people. And you never know what other people are going through. Even in the game I mentioned at the beginning about people treating others like NPCs in real life, maybe that person that cut me off in traffic is rushing to see a family member in the hospital. Maybe the person yelling at an hourly employee at ShopRite about the price of a rotisserie chicken is struggling with their finances. Maybe the person saying nasty things to you on the internet because of differing political beliefs is doing so out of a place of fear, whether that fear is founded in reality or not.

This isn't to make excuses for people to treat other people badly, it's to say that you only have control over yourself. The choice to show good moral character is just that: a choice. And like anything we want to become good at, it takes practice. But it's something that, with practice, we can all become better at each day.

So despite the fact that I've already said over 1,634 words about character and being a good person, let me end with a simple, yet profound

quote by Marcus Aurelius's: "Don't go on discussing what a good person should be. Just be one."

