

Kindness Ambassador

AMIT DODANI, 16
West Hills

A speech impediment led Amit Dodani to discover his life calling. Growing up, the 16-year-old had trouble pronouncing “c” and “s” sounds, among other consonants. “That really prevented me from having a lot of self-confidence,” he says.

Amit tried speech therapy but didn’t like it, so he eked by on his own. But by then, he’d developed low self-esteem and a fear of public speaking.

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He found solace in an unlikely school activity: mock trial and debate. “It was kind of crazy—the idea of a kid who has a speech impediment trying out for an activity based on speech,” he recalls. But the team’s two coaches worked with him, and before long his greatest weakness had become his greatest strength.

“I realized that was a story that I could tell,” he explains. So he started a website where contributors could talk about overcoming personal hurdles—bullying, body image and autism, for instance.

Yahoo promoted the forum, and word spread. He soon founded a club at Chaminade College Preparatory School, where he’s now a junior.

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These days that’s the focus of My Name My Story (MNMS), which has blossomed into a national, student-run organization that aims to kindle empathy between kids at school and beyond. MNMS cultivates a “culture of empathy” on school campuses through teamwork, leadership opportunities and community service. It’s all about breaking the ice and creating a caring youth community, says Amit, who now exudes easy confidence in front of a crowd.

There are currently 14 MNMS clubs in California and on the East Coast. Amit has given inspirational speeches to thousands of students at schools and conferences across the country. This summer, the organization will host a social entrepreneurship camp in West Hills for high school students.

“There is so much power in storytelling,” Amit believes. “You can’t hate someone whose story you know.”

