

A CONVERSATION WITH...

Get inspiration from one special individual who's making a difference.

Harriet Turk

Harriet Turk is a renowned professional speaker who has worked to develop and implement youth programs as a coordinator for the Mississippi Governor's Office of Highway Safety. Having struggled to overcome many obstacles during her teenage years, Harriet's relatable life experiences have been inspiring young people for more than 20 years. Turk was a featured speaker at LEAD DC and LEAD Chicago this year.



Advise: When did you know you wanted to become a motivational speaker for the secondary student audience?

Turk: It was when I hired speakers when I was a youth programs coordinator. I never could find women speakers. I thought, "If I'm looking for women speakers, maybe others are, too." Mark Scharenbroich and Eric Chester (well-known keynote speakers) were my biggest cheerleaders. I didn't think I had the skills to be a speaker on a national level—I was always just the emcee for the conferences—but people saw me and said, "You really could do this and there's a need for women." And during that time, there were a lot of speakers on alcohol and drug prevention who were former addicts during the time of "Just Say No." I was coming on the scene completely fresh since I was not a former addict; I thought I could bring something new and exciting to the table.

Advise: That's an interesting point you raised about there not being many speakers who are women. Are there any words you have specifically for the young women involved in student leadership?

Turk: You need to figure out what you can do well and go in that direction. Women are sometimes not that confident in themselves and we can get intimidated easily. Just stop and reflect on where you want to go. Then, you can create a plan and have backup plans and have high expectations of yourself to achieve what you want. There are a

lot of steps along the road of getting to where you want to be. Create high expectations for yourself, have a lot of plans, give yourself a break, and realize you can do what you want within your talent and skill base. You've got to figure out what you want to do and have the confidence to know you can achieve it. I try to instill that confidence in everyone, and especially young women.

Advise: In your teenage years, you struggled with the idea of attaining perfection, which led to an eating disorder that took many years to overcome. What would you like to tell today's young people who may be facing similar issues?

Turk: I was always in student leadership, and I was always a class officer and I loved high school, but I always thought I had to do everything perfectly. When I couldn't do everything perfectly, I always thought I was a failure. So, my advice would be this: Give yourself a break! You don't have to be perfect, and you don't have to be like everyone else. I would see what others were doing and I'd think, "Oh, she makes this so easy," or "He does this so well," and I would constantly be comparing myself to others and their accomplishments. I didn't really take the time to develop who I was, and that is so important. So, that's one of the messages I try to convey: Take the time to figure out what you want to do and give yourself a break when you can't do it right away.

Advise: You are known as the “Get Fired Up” speaker. How do you go about energizing young people when you speak to them? What pointers can you give advisers to encourage student engagement?

Turk: One of the things I’m really big on is to be inclusive and go to the people you’re trying to serve. We have to go to where the people are instead of waiting for them to come to us. Be collaborative. Go to the people who are different than you. When I planned programs in student council, I’m not sure if I ever cared if anyone outside my group came. I was only interested in hanging out with my group of friends. But there’s a whole other campus out there. There are lots of people who often get overlooked. Go to the people you’re trying to serve—especially the people who don’t ever show up—and find out why they’re not coming.

My son is one of those kids who just doesn’t get involved, ironically enough. When I asked him why, his response was simply, “Well, no one ever asked me to.” If you’re never asked to go, why would you? We gravitate toward people who are like us and think we’re successful if we reach those people, while forgetting about those who are not there.

Advise: Why do you think student council and the Honor Societies are great outlets to assert student leadership?

Turk: I think the Honor Societies and National Student Council are fabulous for developing confidence in students and helping them to learn responsibility. These organizations help students develop skills they can use for the rest of their lives—public speaking, becoming comfortable working behind the scenes (as opposed to being in the spotlight), helping schools and communities come together. You need a lot of heart to volunteer in these organizations; that’s a big piece that student council and the Honor Societies have that other groups don’t.

Advise: During your middle/high school years, was there a particular teacher or adviser who inspired or influenced you most directly?

Turk: Two actually come to mind for very different reasons. The first is my senior English teacher, Mr. Crawford. He was so passionate about what he taught us; we were all so engaged. It didn’t matter

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what he was teaching us, we all loved every minute of his class. The other is my PE teacher, Mrs. Collins. She was my track and volleyball coach. She was so tough that we were terrified of her, but we responded to her because she demanded the very best in a respectful way. And because of that, we performed for her. Two totally different styles that spoke to different sides of me.

Advise: Why is leadership such an important quality to instill in today’s students?

Turk: You have to know how to lead yourself in order to be successful. It all starts with looking inward. Student council gives students confidence. It helps with problem-solving and critical-thinking skills and allows students to discover what motivates them to do well in their lives. If you don’t have self-leadership, you can’t lead other people and you flounder throughout your whole life.

Advise: If you were going to impart advice and guidance to the secondary level students of today, what would you share?

Turk: Don’t stop with just one idea. Have high expectations, but have backup plans. My mom would always say have plans B, C, and D at the ready. So many times we just have plan A and think we’re a failure because it doesn’t work out. Be thinking about what happens when plan A falls through. What you think you want to do right now may not be the right fit down the road, so keep exploring! •

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