

OVERCOMING ODDS Speakers aim to inspire all

Disabilities focus of conference

By **JARED STONESIFER**
Eagle Staff Writer

CRANBERRY TWP — Inspirational stories of triumph over disabilities uplifted about a hundred people Wednesday who came to Four Points Sheraton Pittsburgh North to learn more about living with people who have disabilities.

The two-day conference, organized by the Peal Center of Pittsburgh, featured more than 30 speakers who brought stories of frustration and triumph to the podium. The speakers' messages inspired the crowd to never let poor self-esteem defeat dreams and showed that anything is possible with the right attitude.

Ceil Belasco cried as she listened to Jamie Burke, a sophomore at Syracuse University, tell his story of overcoming stigmas associated with autism and his personal struggles dealing with the disability.

Belasco knows something about disabilities. Her 22-year-old son and her younger broth-

er both have Down syndrome.

Burke's autism prevents him from speaking without first typing his words into a computer. Once those words are visualized, Burke can read the text aloud and verbally communicate.

Belasco said Burke's words touched her deeply, a feeling she's sure radiated throughout the entire room.

"Information is powerful," Belasco said. "There was a whole room full of people here who walked out believing that anything is possible."

David Carson, an admissions counselor for LaRoche College in Pittsburgh, also spread motivational words of wisdom by telling his story about the dangers of low self-esteem.

Carson was a former star football player for a high school south of Pittsburgh before his learning disability dashed his dreams. He said the disability created such a low sense of self-esteem that it seeped into every aspect of his life despite successes on and

off the playing field.

"At an early age I thought I was dumb," he said. "And I believed that, so I thought it was true when it wasn't correct at all."

Carson said he won a full scholarship to play football at North Carolina State University. He was supposed to be Bill Cowher's roommate, Carson said, but never boarded the plane to fly south because he told himself he wasn't good enough and that he'd be rejected.

Carson eventually overcame his disability and wrote a book now used by 24 colleges and universities across the country. The book details his struggles and eventual triumph over his disability and encourages others to never let their problems stand in the way of success.

"Self-esteem is so important," he said. "What you think of yourself, you'll carry it with you for your whole life."

Liz Healey, executive director of the Peal Center, said Carson's story is one of thousands that inspire people with disabilities across the country. That's why she takes pride and joy in arranging the large conference because it's an opportunity to spread encouragement.

"We just want people with disabilities to be a part of the community without anyone batting an eyelash," Healey said. "That's why we work to create an inclusive world that we'd all like to live in together."

