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Academy, Vermont's Scott Talks
About His Beliefs**

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Sharon — As more than a hundred teenagers watched expectantly, the governor of Vermont stood at the front of the cafeteria on Thursday morning and began reading words aloud from a piece of paper.

Administrators at the Sharon Academy had asked Gov. Phil Scott to speak about his core beliefs, as part of a two-year “Beliefs” curriculum. Many students were hoping that an intimate and personal window into the life of Vermont’s top political leader would help them to better understand and articulate their own core values.

For the past decade, the academy’s 10th-graders have delivered lengthy presentations on their own core belief systems. Each student is encouraged to distill the essence of their beliefs down to a single word — a belief word, like a verbal talisman that would forever help them to navigate the rough waters of a post-graduate world.

“When you have an audience of young people listening that intently, it’s a real responsibility,” said Academy Head of School Michael Livingston, whose belief word is “learning.”

Among the listeners were academy seniors Bailey Wright, of Tunbridge, and Eliza Masteller, of Straird, both 17.

Wright's search for her own belief word — empathy — drove her to aim for a career as a psychiatrist, and to give voice to the special challenges of being personally affected by the pain of those around her.

"You struggle a lot, never wanting to let anyone down," she said. "It can be a constant feeling of being ripped to shreds."

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Masteller's belief word — grit — reflects the tenacity she developed in eighth grade, learning to cope with the fog that descended upon her in the wake of the death of a beloved aunt.

"Though I was floating up in the air, it also led me to who I am," said Masteller. "Grit isn't about doing it all by yourself. Sometimes it's about knowing when to ask for help."

One day, when the girls were in ninth grade, Wright noticed Masteller crying in the school building. Wright invited her into a counseling room to talk through her feelings, and the two have been best friends ever since. As they listened to Scott, they were keen to learn how his personal experiences as a businessman, race car driver, and politician had shaped his own core values.

The governor's prepared remarks didn't seem to answer that question.

"It was very formal," Wright said tactfully.

"I definitely feel," said Masteller, choosing her words carefully, "that he didn't have a belief word."

The speech, delivered by Scott in his suit and red tie, was brimming with the sorts of platitudes and team-building tips that would have seemed at home at a campaign event, or a business workshop.

"In my view, it's this listening, learning, leading approach that builds constructive dialogue," Scott said at one point, followed a few minutes later by talk of how he'd assembled his administrative team using the four Cs — character, competence, commitment and chemistry.

But then, as Scott wrapped his prepared speech and opened the door to questions from the students and faculty, the mood of the room began to change.

“The presentation shifted,” Livingston said. “As he got more comfortable, did you see what happened to the number of questions?”

More and more hands began to shoot up into the air during an increasingly lively question-and-answer session that the governor allowed to continue for nearly an hour. The topics ranged from questions about his stances on issues like net neutrality and the role of political lobbyists, to his personal experiences growing up as a motor-savvy tech student in Barre, Vt.

Scott spoke about his father, who survived a double amputation because of injuries sustained during the D-Day invasion of World War II and took a job as a truck driver.

“My Dad unfortunately passed away when I was 11 and left my mom at a very young age with three rambunctious young boys,” Scott said.

Livingston credited the students with helping to draw Scott into a more personal discussion.

“They’re an amazing audience,” he said. “Good speaking and listening go hand in hand. It was the interplay between the students and the governor, built on trust and respect. That was my favorite part.”

Scott talked about being shaped by his own experiences as a student at Spaulding High School.

“I loved to build and create and craft things,” Scott said. “I loved doing that. I loved working with my hands. I was very involved in technical education, vocational trades. I remember being in high school, and I was into race cars. Anything with wheels and motors, I was interested in.”

Scott said he felt torn between his love of motors and his other academic pursuits.

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“There was a stigma attached to that. ... They didn’t understand why a college-prepped kid was in the program with them,” he said. “And in the mornings they didn’t understand why a vocational kid was trying to further their education there.”

He recounted going to the University of Vermont to pursue a career as a technical education teacher. But after earning a bachelor’s in industrial education, he wound up becoming a businessman in the state’s construction industry instead.

He’s brought his hands-on skills with him into the political sphere.

“Where I am today, problem- solving, is from the basis of that,” he said.

Scott entered politics with a successful state Senate bid in 2000, and he was elected lieutenant

governor in 2010. An avid stock car driver, Scott has the most career wins as a Late Model driver at Thunder Road.

The audience became rapt when Scott drew a direct line between his personal beliefs and the challenges facing the state.

“Three numbers keep me up at night,” Scott said, explaining that the numbers were six, three and one.

Every day, Scott said, on average, Vermont’s workforce shrinks by six workers, and the number of students in the education system shrinks by three students.

“The ‘one’ is the most concerning to me,” Scott said. “We have one baby born to addiction every single day in the state. Those are the numbers we need to change.”

After the presentation, students were quick to mention the moment.

“The six, three, one!” said Wright.

“Oh,” Masteller clutched her hands to her chest, to convey how deeply she’d been affected by the thought of children born to addiction. “It helped me learn that he’s just a real person.”

Livingston said he thought Scott’s belief word might have been service, or civility, which Scott cited when offering a Donald Trump-era twist on the golden rule: “Tweet others as you want to be Tweeted.”

Masteller and Wright were asked to, individually, guess what they thought the governor’s belief word might be. Both came up with the same one: Community.

“He’s creating and making that difference. That’s what he’s doing,” said Masteller.

“He’s down to earth,” said Wright, “and listening to everyday people.”

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