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Personal stories emerge at anti-bullying summit

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By ERIC OBERNAUER

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SPARTA -- Describing what it was like to be bullied, a student at Sussex County's 12th annual Bullying Prevention Summit said she used to feel like a ghost.

Invisible to her peers most of the time, she said the only time she ever fit in was on Halloween. It was her way of explaining that the pain of being a victim was compounded by the isolation of peers who shunned her to avoid becoming targets themselves.

Others then chimed in with their own stories of being made fun of, shunned or abused. One student told of a boy who had been picked on for having a lisp. Still others recalled examples of kids being harassed for a disability or for wearing eyeglasses or for being too smart, too big, too small, too skinny, or for wearing different clothes.

It was a candid and at times uncomfortable conversation for some of the more than 800 preteens and teens, about 20 from each middle school in the county, who attended Wednesday's event at Sussex County Technical School. An additional 188 high school mentors, 105 educators and more than 40 volunteers also participated in the discussions.

For author Doug Wilhelm, who spent the better part of the morning facilitating the conversations, the stories had a profound resonance with his own memories of growing up in Millburn nearly 50 years ago.

As a middle-school student there, Wilhelm said he, too, faced the daily taunts and petty cruelties of schoolyard bullies who ridiculed him for being, in their eyes, too skinny and too tall. Standing 6 feet 10 inches tall today, Wilhelm said he also was made fun of because he liked to write.

"I was a very awkward middle-schooler," Wilhelm said. "I was bullied every day, and it wasn't an easy time."

The pain of those years later became the foundation for Wilhelm's writing career. In his novel "The Revealers," he tells of three bullied seventh-graders who decide to turn the tables on their tormentors by documenting the bullying online until, in their quest for revenge, they get tricked into publishing a false report forwarded to them by another student.

In the novel's sequel, "True Shoes," Wilhelm picks up on these themes by tackling head-on the subject of cyberbullying and, as he put it, "the real ways young teens are communicating and searching for themselves in this connected world."

When asked how he came up with the title "True Shoes," Wilhelm replied by referring to a saying that a lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes. The words we use, Wilhelm said, can be used for good or for ill.

"Good stories come out of the problems we encounter and overcome, and good lives come out of the choices we make," Wilhelm said. He added that through instant messaging and electronic communication, "we today have the power like never before to share our creativity and positive selves with the rest of the world or to use these tools in negative ways."



Photo by Tracy Klimek/New Jersey Herald Seventh-graders who attend Kittatinny Junior High School and live in Lafayette, called the Bullying Patrol, perform a skit Wednesday during the Bullying Prevention Summit at Sussex County Technical School.

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These and other components of Wednesday's program, which included performances, speeches, and skits by various student groups, were part of a comprehensive effort to promote a positive climate at county schools, one where every student feels cared about and has the sense of security needed to take risks and grow.

Creating and fostering such a school culture takes a consistent effort, said Becky Carlson, director of the Center for Prevention and Counseling, in Newton. Since 2000, the center has overseen a program called the Coalition for Healthy and Safe Communities, aimed at empowering young people to recognize their role and responsibility in creating a school culture where bullying is not tolerated.

The students at Wednesday's event were drawn from anti-bullying clubs and other student organizations at various schools throughout the county. Through annual events such as these, the Coalition continues its efforts to instill in young people an appreciation for how their actions -- and inactions -- give bullies power.

"You know how it feels because you've been there before," Carlson told the students. "Maybe it just started with a word or two, now and then. Then, just as you feared, it escalated. You might have been standing by in the crowd while one student was giving another student a hard time. You felt the butterflies in your stomach as you struggled with what to do -- step up and say something or just blend in with the crowd so you stay safe. Or maybe you were the target trying to keep your head above water and hoping that someone, anyone would lend a helping hand."

As part of an effort to cultivate the confidence and leadership skills to stand up to bullying, each attendee was provided a reference binder of materials that they will use to help their schools develop an action plan and activities to implement throughout the school year. The activities are intended to build on anti-bullying actions taken over the prior year, ranging from a "No Name Calling Week" at Fredon Elementary School to a "Bully Patrol" at the Lafayette Township School to an eighth-grade Teen Tech Club at St. Joseph School, in Newton, in which students made and starred in their own anti-bullying videos.

"There are simple steps we can all take to encourage acceptance and respect and prevent future bullying in our schools and communities," Carlson said.

But, she added, it "will take your commitment and your courage to take these skills and make a difference. Just because bullying is out there doesn't mean we have to accept it. It only takes one -- why shouldn't it be you?"



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