

Wicklow resident addresses House of Commons

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OTTAWA — Wicklow resident Roy Kempton was on Parliament Hill June 5 to represent A.B.I. (the Anti-Bullying Initiative) in addressing the House of Commons Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights.

Kempton spoke at hearings with respect to Bill C-13, an act to amend the Criminal Code. His specific focus was on issues surrounding cyber-bullying, a factor in the death of his granddaughter six years ago this summer.

Abigayle Rachel Kempton was born on July 27, 1994, in Cobourg. In her first dozen years of life, she knew nothing but love from her extended family and friends — playing with her cousins, enjoying games together, the visits to the fall fairs that she loved.

She seemed a happy, amiable child with a wonderful sense of humour, who seemed to make friends easily.

An aspiring poet himself, Kempton was impressed with Abi's own efforts.

"I think she would have been a very good writer," he ventured.

Abi entered a new school for her Grade 7 year, and that's when things changed for her — her appearance as well as her behaviour.

She went from a sunny girl to one who consistently displayed frustration and anger, and then to one who grew quiet and depressed and listened to sad music. She took to dressing in dark clothing and dying her hair black.

Her family could get no explanation from her, and clung to the hope that it was just an adolescent phase. But it proved to be much more when the 14-year-old took her life on Aug. 9, 2008.

In a recent interview, Kempton recalled that, over the two years of bullying his granddaughter suffered, the pace picked up over the last six months — about the time Abi acquired a cell phone and went on Facebook. So it would be easy to deduce that there was an element of cyber-bullying in her case.

It would be difficult to confirm, he allowed, because she took the time before she died to delete all messages from both sources.

"It was never our intent to go after anybody. Kids are kids. They



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Mike Wallace, chair of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights (left) recently welcomed Wicklow resident Roy Kempton to the committee's hearings on Bill C-13. Kempton hoped the story of his granddaughter Abigayle might put a human face on the tragic results of cyberbullying.

say things, they do things they don't really mean," Kempton reflected.

"Abi was very sensitive, but that was not a reason to bully her. Lots of kids are bullied and get through it, thankfully. But she was too sensitive. She couldn't handle it anymore."

When Kempton learned of the hearings in Ottawa, he hoped to be able to share Abi's story for their deliberations — and met with Northumberland MP Rick Norlock to see if it would be possible.

Norlock had some friends who were on the committee. A June 5 appearance was arranged, putting Abi's story on the record along with those of other young people like Amanda Todd, who could see no way to go on living under the pressures they were facing each day.

ABI owes Norlock a debt of gratitude for the opportunity, he said.

"I thought it was good to be there and to put a face on this thing. Most of the speakers that day were lawyers — lawyers for Facebook and for the civil-liberties association. They have their concerns, but they need to know that this is the end product — people die," Kempton stated.

"I felt it was good that, at least in that group that were there that day, I could put a human face to this tragedy.

"I was very pleased we were able to take her story to the big house. Hopefully it will mean something."

At the time of his presentation, he reported, the big concern seemed to be protecting people's privacy, especially when a case warrants police involvement. As

far as Kempton is concerned, the concept of privacy in this cyber-connected day and age is not the same concept of privacy he grew up with years ago — and it's a concept that has not as yet been clearly defined.

"We put our stuff out there (online), and they we cry foul when something happens to it," he observed.

Established by Abi's loved ones out of concern for the situations she and other young people must face, the A.B.I. was established. They are observing their fifth year.

"We are about awareness. We go into schools, not to say 'This is how you stop bullying' but to say 'This is what happens,'" Kempton said.

They are also preparing to attend graduations at CDCI East and West to present their annual

scholarships, given to a student who has made a significant contribution toward combating bullying at school and in the community.

"We have had a tremendous amount of public support, both morally and financially," Kempton said.

"After five years, I think the emotion is beginning to wear and tear on some of the family. It's difficult to keep bringing it up all the time.

"But we set out to do this, and we are so very much in focus —

and intend to carry on. We believe we have made a difference, just from what people have told us.

"Things like this, being able to speak to this committee, give us a big boost — take us out of the local domain and give us a bigger theatre."

For the third year, the ABI supporters will be walking in Cobourg's Canada Day Parade, and invite anyone who wants to show their support to join them. If you don't have an A.B.I. T-shirt, Kempton said, they'll have one for you.

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