

'Beyond the Hurt'

Institutional bullying workshop held at Acton High School

By BERNADETTE WARD

Out of the ashes of the most unthinkable act of school violence that occurred in suburban Jefferson County at Columbine High School in 1999 has come a shift in thinking about systemic and institutional bullying and its effects.

In an effort to tackle the issue head on, ten students and two teachers from Acton High School learned about bullying and harassment through *Beyond the Hurt*, a peer facilitation workshop that took place in their school on September 20 and 21.

"Honestly, everything that I learned in the past two days was significant," said Jesseca Brake, a 17-year old Acton High School student. "I learned so much more than before and I'm glad I did."

Designed to tackle an issue that in the past has been seen as 'kids just being kids', the seminar is just one in a series presented by the Red Cross through their RespectEd program offered to help break the cycle of abuse, harassment and interpersonal violence.

The peer facilitation program that Acton High School participated in uses peer-on-peer teaching to transmit information about what bullying is, what harassment is and helps students understand the concept of power within our society.

"We're now in a position to put together some concrete plans to create a positive environment in our schools," said Amy Woods, trainer for the Red Cross program.

Canadian statistics indicate that the vast majority of bullying occurs in or near school buildings. Eight percent of students admitting to being bullied at least once a week and 43 percent of boys and 35 percent of girls claim that they have been bullied at some point during the year.

Although many people may be familiar with the consequences of bullying that for the victim can culminate in emotional scars for life, the costs for the bully and for society at large are something to consider as well.

Adults who were seen as childhood bullies by their peers tend as adults to require more support from government agencies and mental health services. They are involved more often with the wrong side of the law and have more court convictions and difficulties with alcoholism.

Students learn about the dynamics of bullying and what choices are available to each of the players. There is the bully, the victim and the bystander - a role often left out of the process and yet one that speaks loudly to concepts of social order and group psychology.

"Everyone has a part to play here, including students and the community," said Amy Woods, facilitator for the Red Cross.

Many of the concepts are taught through games and role-playing and are designed to test the students knowledge of and tolerance for differences in people and cultures.

It's interesting to see what happens when students assume identities such as being a 30-year-old bi-sexual teacher who is raising their partner's children, says Wood.

"It really challenges them and shows their perceptions," she said.

The program also addresses another perception, that of teacher intervention. Statistically speaking, 71 percent of teachers believe that they intervene with bullying problems while only 23 percent of students felt teachers intervene.

"We have to work with the students in a partnership to better the school," acknowledges Daryl Houghton, a teacher at Acton High School and participant in the workshop.

Houghton believes the program is a good investment of time, despite its two-day format. He also believes that the students chosen for the program, who have been drawn from different groups across the student population, will be able to make changes in their environment in a short period of time.

"We have a safe school - let's make it safer," he said.

As part of the program, students get to take their newly found knowledge and perceptions out into the student body where they can keep track of the number of incidents that they observe.

The students are also given before and after workshop tests in order to track how well the program works.

The information gathered indicated that the group had a 23 percent increase in their knowledge after the two days of training.

"They're seeing things and feeling things a little differently," said Woods.

The *Beyond the Hurt* Peer Facilitation Training Workshop is just one in a series. *Beyond the Hurt* Adult Workshops, *Beyond the Hurt* "Train the Trainer" Workshop and The *Beyond the Hurt* Youth Presentations are also available.

For more information about these programs, please contact Shelly Grist, project administrator for the Red Cross at shelly.grist@redcross.ca.



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