

Halton high-school boys join war on gender violence

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A pilot program targeting high school-aged boys in Halton Region is working to reshape how men view violence against women and their role in stopping it.

"The success of the program has been breaking down that violence against women isn't just what you see in a shelter," said Brent Duguid, public educator at Halton Women's Place. "The definition of violence needs to be broadened to include things like sexist jokes and homophobic remarks."

The pilot program, called engageMENT, began at three Halton high schools in September, where students examined everything from sports and video game culture, to the connection between toxic masculinity and domestic violence.

Halton Women's Place operates two emergency women's shelters in Burlington and Milton, where their 52 beds are almost always

full. Duguid became the first man hired a little over two years ago, and a year later Kyle Smith joined him on the four-person public education team.

"Halton Women's Place has long believed that men need to be part of the solution to end violence against women," Duguid said.

As public educators they spend most of their time in schools delivering age-appropriate talks about healthy relationships and violence against women. But the thrust to hire men was to develop the male-ally program.

The pilot ran as an after-school program at Bishop Reding Catholic Secondary School in Milton. Through boys Grade 9 gym classes at St. Ignatius of Loyola Catholic Secondary School in Oakville. And through a life-skills class in a special education program at White Oaks Secondary School in Oakville.

In all, about 90 boys went through the eight-week pro-



Nikki Wesley/Metroland

Brent Duguid and Kyle Smith are running a special program for teen boys called engageMENT, which aims to reshape how men view violence against women and educate them on the important role they play in stopping it.

gram from September to December. Now they're looking at continuing the pilot program at new schools this year.

Eventually, Duguid said, he'd also like to see schools take over the program, with teachers trained to run them. He also hopes to bring the program out of the classroom into community set-

tings.

Both men said they saw remarkable transformations.

"There was a real resistance in the beginning and there seemed to be a real understanding by the end," Duguid said.

Initially many of the boys simply didn't think domestic violence was a significant

problem in Halton - a traditionally safe and wealthy community. But the statistics are "sobering" and show the violence happens "in your own backyard," Duguid said.

Some boys argued that sexist jokes or homophobic comments are not part of the real problem of domestic violence.

"A lot of boys said there is a gap ... that those things don't connect," Smith said.

Another common push-back they heard was the confused belief that men face the same levels of discrimination and violence as women.

"It's not on the same scale," Smith said he tells the boys.

At one point Duguid said he played a clip from a video game where a player hires a sex worker, kills her and runs her over with a car. All the boys laughed, he said.

"There is an entire generation that laughs at that, and before you there were people who would not find that funny at all," he told the boys. "So obviously there is a social change."

It's not realistic to expect boys to stop playing violent video games, but Smith said they want them to be conscious consumers and be a voice for change.

In another lesson, they compared two Sports Illus-

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