



Conference on bullying draws a tough crowd

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They swaggered into the multipurpose room. They yelled. They snickered. They shoved each other to get in first.

But their faces looked lost.

"Now what are we supposed to do?" asked Chaughnessy Bryant, 13, surveying the tables set out for her cohort, the toughest kids at Dunedin Highland Middle School.

Then she stared at the demure students sitting at tables next to the entrance.

"Omigosh, omigosh, here they come," said one of these greeters, looking a little pale and nervous.

Aretha Franklin's Respect blared on the speakers.

Bryant and the rest of the incoming group, about 70 other students, had no idea why they were selected to participate in "Unity Day," an all-day event that would take them away from their classes.

Only the greeters, who belong to Dunedin Highland's multicultural club, and their supervisors, Deborah Stieglitz and Jennifer Nance, knew that the next eight hours would be devoted to a single topic: bully control.

"I know in my heart that these kids have the capacity to respect each other, and they have good hearts," said Stieglitz, who normally teaches eighth-grade

language arts. "So I didn't want them to think they were being punished by being here."

As the students sat down, guided by the multicultural club members, the room thundered with voices. Pencils hammered against chairs. Fingers played percussion on tables. Kids hurled epithets and paper airplanes at each other.

"Did you hear that song?" yelled Stieglitz, struggling to be heard. "You have been asked to come to this because we believe you can be leaders in this school. But in order to make this work, I need your respect."

Respect was the catchword of the day. If you don't treat others with respect, you won't be respected. If you can't respect others, it shows you don't respect yourself. And it's all about respecting yourself, said all of the day's instructors, who included members of Community Tampa Bay, a nonprofit group that helps run youth conferences in many area schools.

Message often lost

For many, the message didn't get through. About half of them had to be escorted out of the room as the day unfolded, for disrespecting other students, pushing or shoving, or for not listening to instructors.

And although icebreakers like the human knot and musical chairs united the tough kids with the multicultural club students, who are mostly in honors classes, the two groups sat separately for most of the time, eyeing each other as different species.

"It wouldn't bother me so much to be around them, but it did bother me when I went up to talk and there was all that chatter," said Kayla Varndell, 14, one of the multicultural club members who tried to lead an ice-breaking exercise. "It's hard when they don't respect you."

Activities that involved diagrams and straightforward, classroom-style learning seemed to cause the most problems. Instructors such as Keisha Bell from Community Tampa Bay had to continually yell at students and wait for them to settle down before continuing their lectures.

Video caught attention

What seemed to work best was a video that interviewed kids at other schools who had been bullied, as well as improv skits that paired the members of the two groups.

During the video, in which kids talked about the different reasons they were bullied, such as racial difference, physical handicap, or the clothing they wear, everyone in the multipurpose room was silent.

"Today made me realize that there are many ways people can get bullied," said Kayla Elmore, 13, a bright-eyed girl with a confident, powerful voice.

She said she realized early on why she had been selected for the conference. Some kids were talking a lot and bothering her, and she started yelling at them.

"I thought it was the way to handle it, from my background and everything. I was brought up by a single parent," she said with startling self-awareness, her voice lowering a little.

Elmore recently moved to Florida after trying out a year of living with her father, who works for a trucking company in Syracuse, N.Y. Now she lives with her mother and sisters.

But Elmore said the day's events made her see full implications of bullying.

"I usually like to do things by myself," she said. "But I liked the group activities today. It made me realize bullying really hurts others."

Undoubtedly, Stieglitz said, many bullies come from broken or poor families. But her goal is to see beyond their circumstances, she said, to the great capacity inside of people.

Many students said the day made them realize that the reason they bullied was because they had been bullied themselves.

"I guess it showed that everyone has been the victim of a bully," said Bryant.

Even Bryant herself, when a boy made like he was going to smack her the other day.

And even Stieglitz.

As Stieglitz tried to get kids to stop giving sarcastic answers to her questions, she got frustrated and broke out her real reason for starting the conference.

A constant victim

As a child, she was the constant victim of bullies. She was once invited to a party in seventh grade, she said, only because the person had to invite everybody. When they played "spin the bottle," and the bottle landed on her, everybody quit the game because nobody wanted to kiss her, she said. Then her son became a victim when another kid on the school bus deposited regurgitated Cheetos on his shirt.

"You have no idea the harm you cause people," she said. "When I was bullied, it was something I never got over. It has been my mission as a teacher to protect not just the victims, but the bullies from what they are doing to themselves."

But to a language arts teacher who usually deals with well-behaved students, the bully conference was a wakeup call.

"I'm walking in another teacher's shoes today," she said. "This has been eye-opening for me."

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