



Fox Run School *gets real* about bullying

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Every student has a backpack, but it's not always filled with books.

Wendy Walker, executive director and founder of the "Get Real" motivational youth program, refers to personal issues as a "backpack". Her program aims to instill compassion and understanding in Grades 7-12 students and prevent bullying.

"[It] helps young people see how to create the schools and communities of their dreams," said Walker. "Do unto others as you want to have done to yourself."

All Grade 8 students at École Fox Run School took part in the program, divided into two groups Nov. 14 and 15. Student volunteers from École H. J. Cody School also participated as mentors.

The program discourages students from adding to backpacks, by watching what they say and refraining from bullying.

"Everyone said, 'I don't want any more junk, my backpack is full,'" said Walker.

Get Real also instructs students to think about what they put in their bodies, especially drugs and alcohol.

"This is one of our favourite schools because they walk the talk, it's not just words to them," Walker said of Fox Run.

Grade 11 student Phoenix Schultz first participated in the program when she was in Grade 8.

"It was eye-opening," said Schultz. "The people you look up to deal with the most stuff"

Some of the program takes place in small groups, where students talk about their experiences. These discussions build trust among those in the group, said Schultz, and those privy to secrets don't share them. She added that the discussions are also a start for those who need help to talk about their problems with others.

"They open up so much," said Schultz.

After her first experience with Get Real, Schultz felt motivated to change herself and what was happening around her. Most of her experiences with bullying involved catty drama between girls, she said.

"It's like they go to it and they think about the stuff, but once they go home and really think about it, they realize the things they did weren't right and they can easily change it," said Schultz of the program.

She chose to be a mentor in Grades 10 and 11 because she liked having an older student to talk to when she started high school. While she hasn't had any students from her own small groups approach her, she has helped other younger students.

Walker was first inspired to create the program after organizing a youth group in Calgary, with 25 participants between the ages of 12 to 18. Those attending could choose any topic to discuss, and the conversation ended up focusing on bullying. Everyone present had been victimized at some point.

"I didn't realize it was that rampant," said Walker, adding that she wanted to make a difference.

One girl, remembered Walker, had been bullied in Grade 5. In Grade 11, the experience still affected her. Now 26, her career deals with cyberbullying.

"You can never shake what someone does to you ... It changes who you are," said Walker. "I think it made her stronger." She added that she also had family to support her.

Get Real changes to reflect new forms of bullying. With the suicide of B.C. teenager Amanda Todd last month, who was tormented and blackmailed after a stranger persuaded her to flash him online, the program now includes a discussion about "sexting," where provocative photos are sent via text messages.

With new technology, including cell phones, email, and social media, bullying now happens at all times, said Walker.

"It never leaves you."

Walker believes part of the solution lies with parents and other adults. In addition to being aware of their child's online activities, she said parents should also take an active role in preventing bullying.



"A lot of parents' attitude is that it's a rite of passage, but it isn't that way," said Walker. "You never want any child to live through this."

Grade 8 teacher Mikala Syrnyk said she doesn't often deal with bullying, but added that many students don't bully in front of their teacher. When she has addressed it, students have approached her and told her about the issue.

"If we have to deal with it, this (Get Real) is something we always refer back to," said Syrnyk. She added that she often notices a change in student behaviour after the program, citing students who sit with others at lunch and show more compassion.

At the beginning of the program, Walker said many students are unenthusiastic about it. At the end of the day, many don't want to leave.

"It's amazing," said Walker. "It's really neat to see, at the end of the day, the difference."

"Yesterday I had my second opportunity to support the fantastic work Tracy Delhez is doing at RSF. Once again she led a Get Real Day with the school's grade 8 students. It was an awesome experience for all the students, staff, and community who were able to participate. As Fr. Mike said its too bad that all our grade 8 students can't be part of the experience.

Makes me proud to be able to participate in such truly community building events like the ones Tracy does for her students."

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