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Rising above the violence and fear

Workshop programs teach co-operation and target cyber bullying, gangs, homophobia

March 16, 2008

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The kids – in everything from hoodies to hijabs – hang round the pool table in a converted second-floor classroom at Cedarbrae Collegiate, bang knuckles, mock wrestle and scarf after-school free Jamaican patties, chips and bottled water.

In this room there are no short fuses, no disrespecting, no culture clashes settled via switchblade. It's safe. Not like sometimes out there in a littered hallway.

At Lawrence and Markham Aves., the school is in one of the 13 Toronto areas deemed at risk by the United Way; behind locked doors in principal Mike Poirier's office is electronic equipment operating 82 surveillance cameras.

It's not a bad school, he says. The group in that second-floor classroom has had something to do with that. "It's their comfort zone," Poirier says. Art on the door spells it out. This is the home of RISE. Respect In Schools Everywhere.

RISE started in Sept. 2004, at David and Mary Thompson, then a troubled Scarborough school. Along with the school board, East Metro Youth Services, a local agency, received funding for a three-year pilot project involving the high school and two middle schools. (It is funded now at Cedarbrae by a grant from the province's ministry of children and family services.)

The idea was that kids needed to learn how to recognize, deal with and dissipate violence around them. Through a series of workshops, they would learn about bullying, cyber bullying, gangs, homophobia, dating violence and gender-based violence and they would learn how to present these same workshops to other students.

"At first the response was mixed," says Jessica Weiser, a supervisor with East Metro who



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Kaitlyn Mooney, Priya Naidu and Andrew Goary are proud members of the Rise program — Respect In Schools Everywhere — at Cedarbrae Collegiate.

developed the RISE program.

A power point presentation with a hip hop soundtrack and raw, true-life stories of the effects of date rape, bullying, and cyber bullying helped pull 30 students into the program. Then they began shaping it to fit their world.

Text messages used to show examples of cyber bullying – "You're a loser and we're going to beat you up" – became "You're so bait". The gender violence workshop got a total re-haul. They worked out ways bystanders can stop bullying.

"According to research, 85 per cent of bullying incidents have bystanders and when they do intervene, in 57 per cent of the cases, the violence stops within 10 seconds," says Michelle Moran, a RISE co-ordinator. "When we found this out we said `Wow'."

The recent Falconer report on safe schools highlighted sexual and gender violence in schools. A new study for the Centre for Mental Health and Addiction also found that 33 per cent of Grade 9 boys and 29 per cent of the girls felt unsafe at school at least one day in the month before the survey.

About 25 per cent of the girls reported being coerced or forced into sexual acts, 34 per cent of Grade 9 boys said they had been called a fag or queer and 12 per cent of boys and 14 per cent of girls said they had been victims of cyber bullying.

Researchers who have been assessing the program, now at three high schools, found bullying rates have dropped 50 per cent and school suspension rates have fallen from 17 per cent to 4.6 per cent. "Michelle and I developed the program from scratch. Now there's a 300-page manual, lessons, you name it," says Weiser. Twice a week, the 30 RISE reps meet at Cedarbrae. Of the more than 100 who belong to RISE – the biggest club in the school, Cedarbrae's RISE program co-ordinator Saleem Haniff says with pride – these are the ones chosen to lead. They trained hard in the fall so they could give workshops about bullying, cyber bullying and gender violence to John McCrae senior public school students.

Grade 8 kids have to be the planet's hardest sell – until one or two of the RISE reps tell their own stories. Some of these RISE reps have been to parties when the shooting started, been in gangs, been in trouble. Some have been the bullies, some the victims. RISE was designed to include both positive and negative leaders, not just the "good" kids.

"The idea is to change school culture when they students are younger," says Haniff, 27. "That's why Cedarbrae gets better and better."

KAITLYN

Kaitlyn Mooney is a pretty 17-year-old with flickering, fragile features. It is shocking when she says: "I used to be a very, very violent person."

She was living in Malvern, with her mother, seeing things kids shouldn't see. "It was a nasty apartment," she says now. "The people there made it nasty. Drug addicts and thugs."

She was in diapers when she last saw her older brother who lived with her Dad, a man she

doesn't know. She tried to contact her brother through Facebook but failed. She knows he's in jail but nobody will tell her what for.

In Grade 6, she became a bully – "that's the word" – spewing hateful things about girls who lived with full families in nice houses, girls she hated. By high school she was known as a fighter, running with an older, bad crowd pulling off robberies. "I was horrible. I stole from people who trusted me."

In Grade 10, she spent a night in jail in connection with a stolen car. Her mother posted bail and her family gathered round.

"It was an intervention. They said they loved me. That's when I changed."

And joined RISE.

Her marks are soaring, her Mom's so proud and she plans to study social work at college and then at Ryerson University.

She's 17. "If it wasn't for RISE . . ." she says, her voice trailing off, then she smiles. "I've never been more optimistic in my life."

PRIYA

They'd been badmouthing her friend, gossiping and lying about her sex life and alcohol consumption. Ignore them, Priya Naidu kept saying. But one day her friend, screaming, threw a punch at one of the girls. Then they were on the ground, beating each other with fists. A guy had to break them up; Priya was hauled into the principal's office as a witness.

"Honestly, it would make my hair go grey thinking why it happened," she says. "It was a posse of girls. We didn't know each other. They were all brown, from the West Indies. I am Indian but my friend was from the West Indies too. Maybe she looked at them wrong."

That's when Priya, 17, decided she needed to learn how to solve problems "logically."

"I didn't come (to high school) to fight," she says. "That's what gives high school the twist, living the high school life looking for the bad girl image."

She wonders if maybe her generation doesn't have enough patience. Definitely they don't respect teachers as they did in Bahrain where she was born and raised before her family moved to Canada when she was 9. "Maybe we have too much pride," she says.

RISE has helped her learn how violence starts – often with verbal bullying. "Now I react with calm," she says.

ANDREW

Around his right wrist are the words "Loyalty is a virtue," an admirable sentiment as tattoos go these days.

It's his credo, what he says he lives by, but it got Andrew Goary kicked out of Durham's St. Mary's Catholic School back in November, 2006. A wide receiver on the junior football team, he was

expelled for carrying a weapon in school after an ice pick fell out of his jacket.

"There was stuff going on," the 16-year-old now says by way of explanation. "By association I got involved."

A few nights earlier on Hallowe'en, there was "stuff "going down at the plaza with a group – "not a gang, a group" – of about 30 youth from another school. Someone got stabbed. And so the ice pick? "More of a protection . . . "

Whatever. He was facing a weapons possessions charge, out of school and out of luck. In desperation his single mother shipped him back to Scarborough to live with his grandmother. Last spring he was accepted into an expelled students program (now defunct) run by East Metro Youth Services.

"EMYS. The best. Those people are the most caring people."

This fall he was back at school, at Cedarbrae where he realized the RISE program belonged to EMYS so he signed on. He got involved in a violence intervention workshop, learned so much and became so proficient he was a presenter – at a police function. "Chief of police was there, too" he says with that slow grin. "I've got nerves of steel."