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Student campaign takes on bullies

By JOEL JACOBSON Great Kids

KIDS ARE POURING into the Centre Consolidated School gym, creating an ocean of pink.

The anti-bullying committee, spearheaded by two Grade 7 students who are being bullied at school, has created Pink T-Shirt Day. More than 600 people will fill this space to hear a rock band, listen to a few speeches and, as staff and most students hope, impress that bullying is a behaviour that won't be tolerated.

Rachel Kendall, First South, and Kelsie Mosher, First Peninsula, both 13, started this program a couple of months ago.

"We were inspired by David Sheppard and Travis Price from the Annapolis Valley who started a pink shirt campaign when a male friend of theirs was bullied for wearing pink to school," says Kelsie. "I was being bullied by girls saying mean things and yelling at us and starting rumours about us."

Rachel says the bullies used to be their best friends until after Christmas when it all started. "They accused Kelsie of telling on them for smoking and she didn't even know they were. Then they turned their backs on me and I wasn't doing anything. I felt badly for Kelsie and got angry. That's what started this."

It sounds like typical teenage stuff, but it was hurtful. They decided to strike back in a positive way.

Guidance counsellor Jill Vandertoorn says the girls approached her and vice-principal Carol Hughes with an idea for an Avon products sale to generate money for the pink T-shirts.

"It was encouraging to see their initiative," says Jill, watching youngsters from nearby schools — Lunenburg Academy, Riverport and District Elementary School, and Lunenburg Junior-Senior High — file into the gym to join the Centre students.

"We try to encourage kids being bullied to report to a safe adult and let them know that standing up through positive action will dissolve the bully crowd."

She says she's encouraged that Kelsie and Rachel want to make a difference. The T-shirts are emblazoned by 18 sponsor names, mostly generated by Kelsie, Rachel and their committee of 10 from different grades.

"Our committee decided on a band and a lunch-time barbecue, and then the program in the gym. We had a contest for T-shirt design and the Grade Primaries won."

Through sponsorship and the Avon sale, the girls raised $2,200 and had 600 shirts made

to give to students and staff and for sale.

"I even saw some guys wearing pink jeans this week and others wearing pink, too," smiles Rachel.

Rachel says she's noted a change of attitude in some of her schoolmates "but not the ones who've been bullying me. It bothers me. They've even threatened violence. But today, they're wearing pink T-shirts. I think we can change them."

Kelsie's mother, Marlene, says she's seen a change in her daughter. Because of the bullying she wasn't sleeping or eating well.

"We even had to go the IWK for tests for panic attacks and they attributed it to the bullying. But the more she did on this program, the more positive she became."

Her dad, Leon, remembers being bullied in school. "I tried to get away and some kid knocked me down and I was helped by an older boy. I'm sure everyone is probably touched by bullying. I'm so proud of Kelsie for doing this, for showing there's power in numbers as this whole community comes together."

Rachel says "ecstatic is the word to describe how Kelsie and I feel. We've had many kids come up to us and say thank you."

Grade 5 student Robin Graham joined the committee right away. "I don't like bullying at all. I was bullied but really not anymore, although some people are mean to me. I don't know why they are, but I think this will have an effect."

Her mother, Stephanie, says: "If every 11-year-old like Robin had an opportunity to get involved with something like this, it would change the oath of bullying. We probably can't eliminate it, but can certainly minimize it."

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Joel Jacobson appears Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday.

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