

The Power of Love: How a teen saved herself

First a victim, then a bully. Now she's turned it around

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At 16 years old, Jenn Turner has already saved her own life. Now she's trying to save others.

Turner was a victim of bullying at Vancouver's Lord Selkirk elementary school. She was teased, verbally abused and eventually stalked by a group of vicious girls.

Finally she was cornered in the girls' bathroom and physically attacked, yanked by the arm and flipped over on her head.

"When I went to the principal's office for help, I was called a snitch," she says.

With the help of police and support from the school's zero-tolerance policy, the girl who led the attack on Turner was expelled.

But Turner had been branded a "snitch." Out of teachers' earshot, the insults, abuse and nastiness continued.

Turner toughened under the pressure. By the time she was in high school, she had started lashing out.

"I became a bully," she told The Vancouver Sun. "I turned on others."

Turner's open, heart-shaped face is framed by a riot of braided, cherry-red hair extensions, and her neck is roped with a choke-chain dog collar. She is as tough as she is vulnerable.

The transformation from victim to victimizer is just one of the ways kids become bullies, according to Barbara Coloroso, author of *The Bully, The Bullied and the Bystander*.

"The bully wants to belong," said Coloroso.

"Bullies are often very popular, high-status kids," Coloroso explained. "Bullies often have great leadership skills. They lead gangs. They lead armies."



CREDIT: Mark van Manen, Vancouver Sun
Jenn Turner (left, with a group of friends) became a bully after being bullied. Now she's trying to help other victims.



CREDIT: Mark van Manen, Vancouver Sun
Former bully Max Paquin 20, joined LOVE BC and found a positive channel for his fighting spirit.

Turner, who now works to educate kids on bullying, explains her own metamorphosis.

"You get fed up. Someone's done it to you, there's a hole, a void you want to fill. You feel high, good, powerful by instilling that fear in someone else.

"There was a kid once, and I didn't like his shoes. So I dragged him down the hallway by his backpack and beat him up."

"Bullying isn't about being mad," said Coloroso. "That's why it can't be dealt with through conflict resolution. Bullying is about having contempt for another human being. It's about intimidation."

Turner had learned contempt for others because of the way she had been treated herself.

"We have to say, 'No more, not here, never,'" said Coloroso. "Kids have to know a classroom, a school is a safe harbour."

The message, she said, has to be "I hear you, I believe you, you're not in this alone."

Turner, now a Grade 11 student at New Westminster secondary school, finally reached out by joining Leave Out Violence, or LOVE BC. LOVE, a group dedicated to turning around violence and bullying, had come to her school for an outreach program.

Turner became a regular at LOVE meetings, and when she opened up by sharing a journal LOVE leaders had encouraged her to keep, she found acceptance -- and help.

"Kids are dying every day. We need to act now," said Michael Maxwell of LOVE BC.

Technology has only increased the range and scope of bullying behaviours, said Maxwell. "There's always been name-calling. Shunning. Violence. Now we've got cyber-bullying."

Cyber-bullying is an increasingly common method of targeting a victim. It can include rumour-mongering via e-mail or social networking sites, harassment via cell phone, and other attempts to harm or humiliate a victim using electronic media.

The damage done by cyber-bullying is made more profound by its permanence: once something is posted on the Internet, it's there forever.

For anyone who still believes that cyber- or schoolyard-bullying is an unavoidable rite of passage that kids should just "tough out," Maxwell throws out three names: Dawn Marie Wesley, Hamed Nastoh, Reena Virk.

Eight years ago, at the age of 14, Hamed Nastoh of Surrey filled his backpack with rocks and jumped off the Pattullo Bridge after being mercilessly teased in school.

Fourteen-year-old Dawn Marie Wesley of Mission hanged herself later that year, unable to endure the cruelty of three girls she had to face every day at school.

Reena Virk was also just 14 years when she was swarmed by seven schoolmates -- six girls and a boy -- and then beaten and murdered.

Peer intervention is a powerful tool that might have helped in each of these cases, said Maxwell.

"I could have been Dawn Marie," said Turner, bluntly. "Kid-on-kid, and especially girl-on-girl, is mean and vicious."

It's that kind of honesty that makes kids sit up and listen when Turner speaks. Kids listen, said Maxwell, because she's a peer.

"Peer pressure isn't always bad," said Maxwell. "It only takes one voice to stand up and say, 'That's wrong,' or 'Stop it.' Look at the pink T-shirt campaign."

In September 2007, a Grade 9 student at Central Kings rural high school in Nova Scotia turned up on the first day of school wearing a pink polo shirt. He was immediately targeted by bullies hurling homophobic taunts and physical threats.

When Grade 12 students David Shepherd and Travis Price heard about the incident they immediately went to a local discount store and bought every pink T-shirt they could find.

They also launched an overnight campaign by e-mail and through social networking sights.

"Wear a pink shirt. . . . It's nothing hard and it's ending one of the worst things about high school," said the Facebook site that urged students to participate. The next day 400 students showed up to school wearing pink T-shirts. Shepard and Price distributed more pink shirts to anyone who wanted to join in.

The bullies, cowed by the sea of pink, backed down.

It was an extraordinary example of kids standing up for kids -- one that's garnered world-wide attention.

"Students rallied and put positive pressure on the situation," said Maxwell.

"A high school in B.C. might have 75 teachers and staff, but it will have 1,800 kids," she added. When kids are supportive and empowered, "it's hard to find a bad apple in the bunch."

Coloroso agrees, and identifies "witnesses, resisters and defenders" as keys to resolving bullying issues.

"There are no innocent bystanders," said Coloroso. "We can't have a bullying situation without a bully's henchmen."

The bystander who becomes involved in "the bully circle," the parent or teacher that turns a blind eye, falls into what Coloroso calls "the trap of comradeship."

The bullied youth is often an outsider, separated from the group by manner of dress, nationality, sexuality, grades or confidence levels, explained Coloroso. Anything can function as an excuse for a bully who wants to feel powerful by belittling someone else.

Like many kids who are bullied or who become bullies, Max Paquin, now 20, was an outsider, a visible minority with an economically challenged family.

Paquin had arrived in B.C. from Montreal at the age of eight, shortly after the unexpected death of his two-year-old sister. His single mother was on disability and struggling to raise Paquin and another little sister.

Paquin was awkward and tall for his age, brown-skinned, and he spoke no English.

From the beginning, "the teachers mocked my heritage," he said. "They didn't believe I only spoke French."

There were no ESL classes for Paquin. "One teacher asked in front of the whole class if I only

spoke 'spagilliquack,'" he said. He still feels the sting of that public humiliation. It was a case, he said, of a kid being bullied by his teachers.

Paquin struggled in school, held back by the language barrier and undiagnosed dyslexia. He was teased by peers for being "ghetto" and labelled by the school board as a kid with behavioural and anger-management problems.

While his mother fought with officials to get him the help he needed in school, he fought in the schoolyard.

"Drug-dealing, fighting, bullying," says Paquin. "With kids I was a bully, with adults I was being bullied."

When he was 16, Paquin's mother died of cancer, and he was left to care for his young sister.

Things might have spun out of control, but the fighting spirit that made Paquin a bully had found a positive channel.

Two years before she died, his mother had sent a note to Maxwell at LOVE BC asking him to allow her son to join.

"Violence is the language of the unheard," said Maxwell. "It only takes one adult who cares, one person who listens to help these kids."

For Paquin, Maxwell was one of those people.

Maxwell helped Paquin get involved in LOVE's photojournalism project, in which kids are given cameras and sent out to record their experience of the world.

Through the program, kids become "reporters on youth culture," examining and discussing violence in their own environments. They find a voice by sharing what they see.

Paquin is now a senior youth leader with LOVE. At 6-4, 280 pounds, the dreadlocked young man cuts an imposing figure. But among the kids he works with he's known as the "big teddy bear."

"I never really wanted to bully," he said. "Mike pulled me in and LOVE showed me I could take positive steps to make changes."

Although his mother didn't live to see it, he graduated from high school.

Paquin said every kid needs to find that one thing that will give them hope. "Poetry, photography, sports, whatever," he said.

Turner gives this advice to kids: "If you're a bystander, speak up. Stop it. Look for a program like LOVE that can help. Tell someone what's going on. Wear pink."

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