

Melo family shares anti-bullying message

Friends need to stand together, says the father of a Strathroy teen who was bullied.

By DON PEAT, SUN MEDIA

TORONTO -- John and Maria Melo saw the deadly impact of cyber-bullying three years ago this week.

On Nov. 26, 2004, their son, Joshua, waited for his mother to leave on her weekly grocery trip before hanging himself from a backyard tree.

After being bullied online and at school, 15-year-old Josh decided to end his own life. He was dead when his father found the youngest of his four boys when he got home from work.

It was the same tree that held his boys' treehouse. In his grief, John Melo cut the limb off the tree.

Melo remembers his son as an A to B+ student who was growing increasingly quiet in those last months.

"It's understandable now," Melo said yesterday from his home near Strathroy.

Up until that day, the family had no idea the hell their son was going through. The bullying started with harassing instant messages and continued at school with verbal insults.

Three years later they've learned a lot about bullying and suicide. Melo, a 49-year-old commercial/residential painter, has become an anti-bullying advocate, demanding changes at the local school board and speaking publicly about his son's battle with bullies.

"Anything we can do to help another family," Melo said.

In the wake of Joshua's death, the family searched the home computer for evidence of bullying. The computer audit also told the family it was on the Internet where their son learned how to commit suicide.

"He had it all planned out," Melo said. He knows now most boys thinking of suicide do it in a very planned way.

In the immediate aftermath of Joshua's death, Melo painted anti-bullying messages on the side of his white van. The main messages were, "Bullying kills" and "Where are the teachers and parents?"

The van still has the phrase, "Be a friend," painted on the back.

"It really boils down to friends," Melo said.

He learned if friends of those getting bullied stand up with them, most bullies back down within 30 seconds. That's the message with which he ends his speeches.

Melo asks parents to look their children's friends in the eye and make them promise to stand with their children. He asks parents to have their children promise to stand with their friends against bullies.

He admits it's an uphill battle. Melo knows 60 per cent of kids would not intervene if they witnessed bullying. Although there is more awareness about the effects of bullying and cyber-bullying, Melo said, there are even more places online for bullies to hide and prey on victims such as his son.

"It's a whole different ball game," he said.

The problem still, Melo said, is bullies feel they can do it secretly and without consequences.

Parents can help by being aware of what their children are doing online, he said.

"We wish (Josh) would have let us know," Melo said. "Unfortunately it was too late when he let us know."