

Ten years later, father still telling story of son's death

By IAN GILLESPIE, FREE PRESS COLUMNIST

ST. THOMAS -- He has told this story hundreds of times. So often, in fact, that he figures more than 100,000 students have heard it.

It's a story he wishes he didn't have to tell.

But once again Mike Neuts takes a deep breath, walks to the front of the stage in a cavernous gym and gazes at the crowd.

"I'm here to make you think," he says.

He's said it before. He'll say it again. This time is different.

Because this is the 10th anniversary of his son's death. A decade ago, this frigid Tuesday was the day -- Feb. 12, 1998 -- when his 10-year-old son Myles was taken off life-support in a London hospital, six days after he'd been hanged from a hook in a washroom stall at St. Agnes Catholic elementary school in Chatham.

Here at Parkside collegiate institute, Neuts faces about 400 students and, once again, tells this terrible tale.

Neuts shows pictures of his family. He talks about how he went to work, his wife ran errands and the familiar world they knew and took for granted seemed to be unfolding in such a normal, mundane manner.

But of course, it didn't.

Neuts describes how he got a phone call at work, how he raced to his son's school and how he watched a paramedic administering CPR to his son's body, now drained of colour.

He describes returning to the school, which was now cordoned off with yellow tape, and how the halls were filled with police and one told him, "It shouldn't take long to figure out what happened here."

But no one ever figured it out. Not legally, at least. After a long and painful inquest, the cause of Myles's death was officially pronounced "undetermined."

Unofficially, though, Neuts tells the students about a \$10 bet his son had made two years before, and how Myles asked the boy who lost the wager to pay him, and how the boy reportedly remarked how weird it was that Myles hadn't forgotten that debt and how another boy said, "We'll make him forget."

No criminal charges were ever laid. Neuts admits that only two people know for sure what caused all this grief, and one of them is dead.

Neuts tells the students about the 24 recommendations that resulted from the inquest, including the removal of all hooks and protruding objects from washrooms at elementary schools.

And then Neuts reaches the moral of his story: How he believes Myles was the fatal victim of a bully, and how bullying must be stopped.

He tells them that according to U.S. figures, about 20,000 kids stay home from school each day because they're afraid of being bullied. He tells the students about the three Rs of bullying: Recognize, refuse (to participate) and report.

He talks about respect and tolerance and how even bystanders are to blame.

It's a message the students have likely heard before -- but it's doubtful they've heard it delivered quite so powerfully.

But even despite the non-profit charity (called the Make Children Better Now Children's Association) that Mike and Brenda Neuts



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created, and the message they've spread and the money they've raised (including separate \$1,000 donations presented to safety villages in London and Chatham this week), many question why Neuts is still telling this terrible story, over and over again.

For Neuts, it's simple.

And it lies, he says, in the 3,000 or so letters he's received. Some were from kids who said they were bullies who, after hearing his speech, vowed to stop bullying. And about half a dozen letters came from kids who said they'd contemplated suicide because they were victims of bullying, but after hearing Neuts talk, they decided to live.

"If I don't know who it is I've become or what it is I'm doing, I know by those letters that I have to continue," Neuts tells me after his speech. "It isn't just about Myles anymore. It's not even about me."

He gestures to the students filing out of the gym.

"It's about every one of these young people and their families," he says. "It's about keeping them safe."