



Bullying opponents make it personal

ACTIVISM: Students asked to take the pledge

By HANK DANISZEWSKI

November 14, 2011

Thousands of students will pledge this week to end bullying in the London area, a region where the practice has taken a sometimes deadly toll.

A personal pledge is the foundation of this year's anti-bullying awareness and prevention week that will be marked by schools, businesses and community groups.

"This is a step in the right direction. We think that with awareness, education and enforcement, we will be able to eliminate bullying," said Corina Morrison, co-founder of the London Anti-Bullying Coalition. In extreme cases, bullying has been linked to the deaths of several children in Southwestern Ontario.

Among the deaths were 10-year-old Myles Neuts in Chatham in 1998 and Joshua Melo, 15, of Strathroy in 2004.

About 29,000 people already have taken the pledge online and that number should explode beginning Monday as schools across the region hold assemblies and events focusing on the pledge.

At some schools, student will write their commitment on large murals. Assemblies will feature speakers, choirs, video and slide presentations and hundreds of students, teachers and staff members taking the pledge together.

The campaign is spreading to the community with students and staff at Fanshawe College and workers at Cami Automotive taking the pledge.

The pledge is a personal commitment that helps unify the community around the issue, Morrison said. She points out bullying isn't going away, with four suicides linked to bullying in Ontario since September. The problem also has spread online, Morrison said.

"Now we have cyberbullying. It's huge and it's hard to manage."

But Morrison said there has been great progress in awareness and education about bullying. Bill Tucker, education director of the Thames Valley District school board, said persistent public campaigns have changed attitudes about drunk driving.

“We believe the pledge can have the same kind of impact on people’s attitudes about bullying.” Tucker established a task force in May 2010 to combat bullying in the wake of the deaths of two students that drew focus to how schools deal with bullies.

The two students were a 13-year-old St. Thomas boy whose family directed memorial donations to an anti-bullying group and a Saunders student who took his own life.

The task force that included representatives from nearly 30 community organizations, including police, determined more needed to be done to prevent bullying from happening.

Campaign highlights

Clarke Road secondary school: Students will wear pink Tuesday to stand up against bullying. Monday assembly features speaker Leroy Hibbert, a multicultural outreach co-ordinator at LUSO
Saunders: London Mayor Joe Fontana kicks off the school’s anti-bullying campaign as students take The Pledge.

Former Toronto Argonaut Chuck Winters will speak at the pledge assembly.

Arthur Voaden secondary school, St. Thomas: Giant sheets of paper will be posted so students can write what they stand for. Black and white cookies will be distributed to match the black and white “Upstander” T-shirts students will wear.

Northridge public school: At the pledge assembly, students will sing Be an Upstander, an original song, with lyrics and music written by music teacher Jane Burkman. Students will wear pink.

--- --- ---

Bullying’s consequences

February 1998: Myles Neuts, a 10-year-old pupil in Chatham, dies after he was found hanging from a coathook in a school washroom. Mike Neuts, who believes his son was the victim of a bully, embarks on a campaign against bullying.

November 2004: Joshua Melo, 15, of Strathroy commits suicide. His friends and family said he was the victim of frequent online and in-school bullying.

October 2008: An 11-year-old boy needs surgery and three metal plates inserted into his head after another boy punches him outside St. Theresa elementary school in London. Parents of both boys accuse the others’ boy of being the bully beforehand.

May 2010: Facebook postings indicate Bryten Brown, a 13-year-old pupil in St. Thomas, was the victim of bullying before he died. His obituary requested memorial donations be made to the London Anti-Bullying Coalition.