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Posted October 27, 2016 - 6:01am

Las Vegas students seek solace in online schools after being bullied



By F. ANDREW TAYLOR
VIEW STAFF WRITER

October is anti-bullying month, and local schools and organizations have made efforts to get the word out that the problem is widespread and deeply damaging.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Service's website, stopbullying.gov, kids who are bullied can experience negative physical and mental health issues including depression and anxiety, changes in sleep and eating patterns and loss of interest in activities they used to enjoy. These issues may persist into adulthood.

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Robert Young, 12, said he was bullied in three schools until he transferred to Nevada Connections Academy, an online school.

"I had to try to make a change for him because his character had changed," said Lamesha Young, Robert's mother. "He was fighting with his brother; he was angry and that's not him. He's a lovable kid."

Bullying is defined as unwanted, aggressive behavior among school-age children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. Young said in her son's case, it was persistent and varied. It included kids peeping at him under bathroom stalls and teasing him for things like being quiet and wearing boots.

"The kids said 'Robert's the nerd' and things like that," Young said. "He was teased for bringing his lunch. He was teased for being the teacher's pet. He was teased for little things that didn't make any sense to me."

It wasn't until Robert was in the online school that his mother knew the extent of the bullying he went through.

"I asked him why he didn't tell me sooner, and he told me that he thought he was doing the right thing and that he had to go to those schools," Young said. "His personality has completely changed again, this time for the better. He's not that little kid who's sad and doesn't know if he's coming or going."

According to National Bullying Prevention Center of PACER, Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights, 22 percent of students report being bullied during the school year, and 64 percent of children who were bullied did not report it. The center notes that students who are bullied often experience sleep difficulties, anxiety and depression, and many will also have negative health effects, such as headaches and stomachaches. The Department of Health and Human Services adds that bullying often results in decreased academic achievement for the victim, including a lower GPA and standardized test scores and a decrease in school participation. Bullied students are more likely to miss, skip or drop out of school.

Nevada Connections Academy and other online schools, including Nevada Virtual Academy, can be a haven for a bullied student.

"We attract a lot of students who have been bullied at their district schools or zoned schools," said principal Steve Werlein of Nevada Connections Academy. "The online environment is good for them, and most improve academically and socially after the distraction and abuse of bullying is removed."

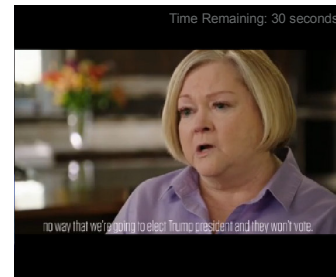
The school participates in the Act of Kindness program, in which students are encouraged to report when they see another student doing something nice for someone. Although the majority of the schooling takes place online, students come in for several hours one day a week to touch base with teachers and their peers.

"It can be challenging in a virtual setting, of course," Werlein said. "Because a lot of the students are here because they were bullied, a lot of them go out of their way to make others feel welcome. We recognize them for doing that."

One former student, Will B. Whitesell, used his performance and public speaking skills to speak out and spread the anti-bullying message. The 13-year-old actor and singer worked with both local and national radio shows to spread the word about bullying and several other issues. Eventually, he had his own radio show, "Will B World" for a few months.

"It had an anti-bullying message, but I didn't want to limit it to that," Whitesell said. "I want to support other causes, like people with breast cancer. I want to help anyone who is raising funds for a good cause."

Whitesell and his family live part time in the east valley and part time in Southern California while he pursues his acting career. While here, he works with Bully Busters 702, an



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organization that not only gets the word out about bullying with shows and appearances at schools and on radio and television but also creates anti-bullying apps and operates a 24-hour hotline.

"We also do after-school programs with the Boys & Girls Club (of Southern Nevada) and the Urban League," said Keith Bowen, the founder and driving force of the organization. "We do a monthly coloring book. We've got an animated cartoon in development. We have our radio show every Sunday from noon to 2 p.m. on WBKE Las Vegas (an online radio station at tinyurl.com/bbradiolv) where kids can talk about bullying. They call in, and it gives them a voice and lets them get things off of their chest."

For students such as Robert Young, having a voice may be one of the most important ways to stop bullying. After he switched to the online school, his attitude transformed and his academics improved.


"He's an A and B student now," Lamesha Young said. "Where he's at now, he's able to raise his hand and speak his voice. The other students know him, and they know his name. He's happy now. He's content."

To reach East Valley View reporter F. Andrew Taylor, email ataylor@viewnews.com or call 702-380-4532.


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