

Bullying event highlights shared responsibility, overcoming adversity

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Beyond the Classroom Inc., **in partnership with the Charles County Public Library system**, hosted a forum on Saturday at **Waldorf West Library** to discuss bullying prevention, child safety tips and school security as part of a kick-off event for National Bullying Prevention Month.

The event, which was sponsored in part by a community grant from the Waldorf Walmart store, featured three sessions including a group discussion, a Q&A session with parents and a bullying prevention activity for students. Attendees also learned about the school system's new "See Something, Say Something" campaign while they enjoyed refreshments, giveaways and raffle prizes.

"The main reason that I wanted to put on this event is because I was bullied as a child," said event facilitator Lisa Ambers, founder and president of Beyond the Classroom Inc. "Fortunately, I had strong parents who instilled in me that God made you who you are and the way you look. So, I didn't let the bullying stop me."

Ambers, whose 25-year-old son was also bullied in the past, took a leap of faith and decided to pay it forward by helping others who have been oppressed in some way. She began coaching her son and then got involved with mentoring kids in Charles County, through her church, as well as adults at the University of Maryland University College.

Ambers became so caught up in her efforts that she created her own campaign called "Stop bullying, spread love." In 2016, she founded Beyond the Classroom Inc. in honor of her late father who shared a passion for helping kids. The nonprofit offers custom programs like anti-bullying workshops designed to address the different types of

bullying, what a bully looks like, ways to stop from being bullied and how to live a happy life afterwards.

She said spreading love is a key message as statistics have shown that more than one out of five children reported being bullied at school, online or in their community.

“Bullying is real, everywhere,” she said. “It’s just a personal thing to me. I feel like I need to change the community. The new campaign for this school year is called ‘choose kind’ so that was the overarching message that I wanted to do for this event. This year we had a lot more content.”

Guest presenters included Charles County Public Schools (CCPS) safety and security director Jason Stoddard, CCPS student services director Kathy Kiessling and North Point High School alumnus Kayla Stewart, an empowerment speaker who is the co-founder of “Bullied But Unbroken.”

“I thought that Mr. Stoddard was off the charts. He had such enthusiasm and passion which came across loud and clear,” said Ambers. “For Ms. Keissling on the student services side, ‘choose kind’ was the biggest message that she expressed. Then, they both met with the adults in a private session which I believe was an excellent conversation.”

Stewart, a 25-year-old resident of Waldorf, shared her personal account of being bullied from pre-K through high school and beyond. Stewart said she was teased relentlessly about her weight, skin color and other things, the worst of which happened in high school as the insults became more venomous and threatening.

Although she didn’t initially understand why she always seemed to be a target, Stewart attributed it to the fact that she was quiet and non-confrontational. Bullies felt that they could pick on her without the risk of retaliation, a miserable experience that Stewart said she doesn’t want anyone to endure.

“I tried to take my own life,” said Stewart, whose mother and younger sister also tried to commit suicide as a result of being bullied. “Bullying will never stop; we won’t ever end it. But if we encourage the youth to be humble and know who they are, that’s how I think we will be able to fight this.”

After graduating high school in 2011, Stewart founded “Bullied But Unbroken” within a year to speak out against bullying. Stewart said it is her belief that those being bullied are not defined by negative insults or abuse, and that everyone should be able to go to school and learn in a happy, non-threatening environment.

“From a parent’s perspective, I just wanted to say how important it is that we support them. When those types of things are reported to us, we should believe them,” Davita Stewart said. “Even if we feel like we can’t do anything about it personally, it’s important to reach out to those who can. Growing up and becoming an adult, [bullying] kept me from doing things and wanting to speak in public in front of people because I was so afraid of what people would say. It’s very important to overcome those things so that we can be a blessing to somebody else.”

Research on preventing and addressing bullying is still developing, but the ultimate goal is to stop bullying before it starts. According to the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control Division of Violence Prevention, some of the factors associated with a higher likelihood of victimization include poor peer relationships, low self-esteem and being perceived by others as different or quiet.

Compared to youth who only bully, or who are only victims, bully victims suffer the most serious consequences and are at risk for both mental health and behavior problems. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) noted that even though school-based bullying prevention programs are widely implemented, they are infrequently evaluated.

“I’ve been bullied since elementary school. I was told to go back to my country, called fat and ugly and stupid,” 17-year-old Aqsa Siddique said. “In middle school, it got to the

point where I just couldn't take it anymore so I attempted to kill myself. The students at my school found out but I'm not sure how. They started calling me more names."

"I wasn't in school because I was dealing with my mental health. But [the bullying] didn't stop," Siddique added. "I went online to a lot of websites and found resources on how to be confident. I tried to put on this [facade] that I was confident in front of other people so I wouldn't have to deal with any of the things they would say. I was able to find that confidence in myself and believe in myself that I am better than the words that people use against me."

Based on a review of the limited research on school-based bullying prevention, CDC reported that bullying can be prevented by improving supervision of students; using school rules and behavior management techniques in the classroom, as well as throughout the school, to detect and address bullying with consequences; having a whole school anti-bullying policy and enforcing it consistently; and promoting cooperation among different professionals to include between school staff and parents.

"The bullying eventually stopped and I think that part of it is because I was able to find the resources and people in my community who I know care about me," said Siddique, an aspiring attorney. "I know that there are people out there who are willing to listen to you and really committed to the fight of ending bullying."

For Siddique, bullying has been an emotional roller coaster full of twists and turns. But the ride doesn't appear to be slowing down for her younger brother, whom she said is now experiencing the same treatment that she endured in middle school.

"He is 11 years old which was the same age that I got bullied," Siddique said. "Seeing him go through the same thing is very emotional for me because I know how hard it is. The teachers didn't really do much so I'm just trying to be there for him as much as I can. I'm just glad that I was able to be here at this event and help advocate to stop bullying because it's a very real issue."

Stewart encourages those who are being bullied, and even the bullies, to find their self-worth, boost their self-esteem, learn to love themselves and above all, decide not to allow the opinions of others to define who they are.

“A lot of times, kids don’t come forward because they don’t want to have to deal with the retaliation. They are being bullied in silence,” Ambers said. “My advice is don’t let the bully get to you or block you from doing what you want to do — your goals, your dreams, your aspirations. A bully lashes out and does things for a reason. Stay focused on yourself and if you’re being bullied, seek help.”

For more information about Beyond the Classroom and upcoming events, send an email to info@beyondtheclassroominc.org.