

THE TORCH

CIVIL RIGHTS TEAM PROJECT NEWSLETTER

March 2006

Newsletter Editor: Amy Homans

This issue of *The Torch* highlights the growing problem of cyber bullying and suggests different ways to address it within your school community. This issue also includes a look at what one middle school team has been doing this year, some follow up ideas for this fall's Words Count training, more information on the Statewide Conference, the Toolbox Tip of the Month and more.



Cyber Space: The New Playground for Bullies

Once upon a time, victims of school yard bullies could take comfort in being alone or in the safe haven of home. Sadly, that time passed with the advent of instant messaging, personal web pages, blogs, and cell phones. Today's young people are members of the "Always On" generation and many cannot imagine life without constant access to instant electronic communications. However, these means of communication that allow the "Always On" generation to stay connected are also the means by which bullies and harassers now turn to torment their victims.

Victims of what has come to be known as "cyber bullying" receive hateful, hurtful, and sometimes threatening, messages from unknown senders. Cyber bully victims are also the subject of messages containing nasty rumors, embarrassing information, or mean spirited comments that are sent to large numbers of people, sometimes to an entire school user group. Some cyber

bullies use other people's screen names, causing the victims to mistakenly believe that the messages are from the person with that particular screen name. More commonly, cyber bullies simply use screen names that are unknown to the victim so the victim has no clue as to the sender's identity.

The anonymity of cyber bullying has taken the whole concept of bullying and harassment to a whole new, more vicious level. Victims can sit in their own bedrooms, in the former safety of their own homes, with their parents in the next room, and be tormented in black and white on their own computer screen, by an unknown perpetrator. The anonymity allows the bully to say things that he or she could not or would not say to the victim in person. It can make children dread going to school because they do not know which of their classmates is behind the barrage of hateful messages in their In box.

Another widely abused tool in the world of cyber bullying is the cell phone camera. There have been numerous instances of humiliating photographs of a victim being sent to every e-mail address within an entire school community as well as being posted on the worldwide web. Recently, a Maine high school was in the news after parents of a special needs student complained that other students had urged their son to do things that made him look foolish, took electronic photos of him that captured what they had urged him to do, and then widely distributed the photos in an effort to make fun of the boy.

More and more schools are now attempting to address this issue because of the potentially enormous impact that cyber

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bullying has on the climate of a school community. Creating a safe school climate for every student is the overall mission of the Civil Rights Team Project and taking steps to address cyber bullying fits squarely within that mission. Here are some suggestions as to how you and your team can address the issue of cyber bullying in your school community.

- Educate students on how to protect themselves from cyber bullies.

- Take simple steps, like not giving out contact information, including cell phone number, email address, IM password or nick name to anyone other than close friends.

- If you are harassed, leave the site immediately and put a block on the sender's name so you will not receive any more messages from that screen or user name.

- Save harassing messages and forward them to the Internet Service Provider (AOL, Yahoo, Hotmail, etc.) used by the harasser. All reputable service providers have policies that restrict users from engaging in harassing conduct. For an explanation for how to contact an Internet Service Provider, go to www.cyberbullying.us/resources.php and click on **Network Query Tool**. (This site has other downloadable information sheets about various aspects of cyber bullying.)

- Advise students to report threats of physical harm to an adult, regardless of whether the sender is known or anonymous.

- DO NOT reply to a harasser. Online bullies are just like offline bullies: they want their victim to respond. Denying the bully the satisfaction of a reaction or response is

one way that a victim can fight back. Victims need to resist the temptation to shoot back an angry message. The lack of face-to face contact levels the playing field somewhat and engaging in a back and forth dialogue with the harasser can cause a situation to escalate quickly. Suggest different things kids can do to keep from clicking the Send button while angry or upset, including: going offline for a while, calling a friend, or taking the dog for a walk.

- Post or distribute a tip sheet to all students with information about cyber bullying. All of the cyber bullying web sites mentioned in this article have great information that can be used to create a tip sheet.

- Help raise awareness about cyber bullying by having your school take a quiz that assesses the level of cyber bullying experienced by each student. Go to www.wiredkids.org/ktt_universal/games/javascript/cyberbullying_quiz_1/index.html to find a good quiz that kids can take to assess the existence or level of cyber bullying in their life. This is an online quiz, but the questions could easily be typed out and distributed to each student to fill out during a designated home room period.

- Inform students that threatening language, whether sent to a victim or posted on a site such as myspace.com, falls within the jurisdiction of the Maine Civil Rights Act and other Maine laws relating to threatening and harassing conduct. The State of Maine has investigators trained to trace the source of electronic messages and many experienced computer technicians are able to do that as well. Cyber bullies should not assume that they are outside the reach of the

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law just because they use a screen name that differs from their real name.

- Send home a fact sheet for parents that describes cyber bullying and include a list of warning signs to help them determine whether their child is a victim or a perpetrator of cyber bullying. A list of warning signs can be found at www.cyberbullying.us/resources.php. Click on [Cyberbullying Victim and Offender Warning Signs](#) to go directly to the fact sheet.

- For a good, informative, comprehensive article on cyber bullying that outlines steps that schools, parents and victims can take to address this issue, check out Media Awareness Network's "Challenging Cyber Bullying". It can be found at www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/special_initiatives/wa_resources/wa_shared/backgrounders/challenge_cyber_bullying.cfm. Try "Cyber Bullying: No Muscles Needed" at www.connectforkids.org/node/3116, for yet another good article with tips for schools and parents. If you are looking for an article with primarily bullet point facts, go to www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/indexAdult.asp?Area=cyberbullying.

- Review your school's harassment policy and make sure that it covers harassment perpetrated through electronic communication devices. If it looks as though the policy does not cover cyber bullying, bring it to the attention of school administrators with concrete suggestions as to how the policy should be amended. Work to ensure that your school has serious consequences for violations of the policy.

Note: Schools may have liability for students who continue to cyber bully

students at school after the conduct is reported to the school administration. The Maine Human Rights Act prohibits harassment based on race, religion, ethnic origin, mental or physical disability, gender and sexual orientation that negatively affects a student's educational opportunities. This law provides an additional incentive for schools to take cyber bullying very seriously and to institute policies and procedures that address it.



Spot Light On Schools: Troy Howard Middle School

Meghan Southworth and her team at Troy Howard Middle School in Belfast have had a busy year so far. They obtained their own copy of the *Don't Laugh At Me* video that was shown at the statewide training in the fall of 2004 and are using it to do school-wide trainings. The team has put together several groups of four students to present the "Torn Heart" activity that is described in the *Don't Laugh At Me* teacher's guide. The teams are presenting the activity, along with the video, to all of the school's sixth graders.

The team also recently hosted three assemblies, by grade, to show the short film that it made through the Civil Rights Team Film Project with Det. Margie Berkovich and CRT Project Administrator Debi Gray. The students who performed in the video described the making of the film, showed the film, and then took questions from the audience. Each assembly lasted approximately twenty minutes. The team is also planning to show their film to their local school board. *This is a great way to interact with your school board. Too often,*

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school boards are either uniformed or misinformed about the mission of the Civil Rights Team Project and the terrific work done by teams in their own communities. Showing your school board what the civil rights team does is a wonderful way to educate the members on the positive role you play in your school community.

Meghan ordered 36 copies of the book "And Don't Call Me A Racist," that was described in the January issue of *The Torch*. She is distributing them to each member of the team and they will mark their favorite quotations as they read through the book. The team will then post their favorite quotes from the book on the team's bulletin board.

In April, the Lubec Civil Rights Team will be coming to Troy Howard Middle School to work with the team on interactive theater. The Troy Howard team will watch the Lubec team perform their interactive theater pieces and then work with Lubec to develop some of their own. The team will be hosting a dance to raise the money to pay for Lubec's visit to Belfast. *Collaborating with another team is a good way to share resources between communities. It is also a treat for team members to have a chance to get to know kids from other schools who share their interest in making schools a safer place for everyone.*

Keep up the good work, Troy Howard Middle School. To contact Meghan Southworth for more information about her team's projects, e-mail her at msouthworth@sad34.net.



More information on *Don't Laugh At Me*

For those of you who were not at the fall 2004 statewide training, *Don't Laugh At Me* is a very short video that shows mentally and physically disabled people, both young and old, in the throes of glorious accomplishments. This is a film that softens the most hardened heart and brings many to tears. It was created by Operation Respect: Don't Laugh At Me, founded by Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul and Mary. Operation Respect: Don't Laugh At Me is dedicated to creating safe, caring and respectful environments for children. The video is simply wonderful and a fantastic way to personalize people that some of your students might fail to value for who they are.

There is no dialogue with the video. It has a music soundtrack, including the song "Don't Laugh At Me," sung by Peter, Paul and Mary. That song, for which the video is titled, has lyrics that include the refrain, "Don't take pleasure from my pain." That is a phrase that resonates loudly for many of us who care deeply about the emotional safety of every student and it appeared on the back of more than one team's t-shirts after the fall 2004 training.

The video and an accompanying teaching curriculum can be obtained free of charge by going to <http://www.dontlaugh.org>. There are three separate teaching curriculums: grades 2-5, 6-8, and for camps and after school programs. They are an excellent resource for your school and are made available at no cost through the generosity of The McGraw-Hill Companies.

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Toolbox Tip of the Month



Your toolbox is full of materials published by Teaching Tolerance, an organization founded in 1991 by the Southern Poverty Law Center. Teaching Tolerance was founded for the purpose of providing K-12 educators with resources and ideas for promoting equity and respect in young people across America. It provides free, award winning resources that include a semiannual magazine, video and text curriculum packages (some of which are in your toolbox), special publications and a web site, www.teachingtolerance.org.


There is a brochure in your toolbox, in the folder labeled "Teaching Tolerance," that describes the free resources that were available to you through this organization at the time we made the toolboxes. To find out what has been added since 2003, go to www.teachingtolerance.org and check out the website.

The Teaching Tolerance web site is a wealth of information in its own right and is frequently updated. It currently features a link to its newest curriculum, a teaching kit about Holocaust survivor Gerda Weissman Klein. The kit contains an Oscar-winning film, documents and standards-based lesson plans. It is available at no cost and can be ordered through the Teaching Tolerance web site.

Other items of interest at this wonderful web site include: Classroom Activities; the Teaching Tolerance on-line magazine; Web Exclusives; and a section dedicated to helping you create a successful Mix It Up Day, plus follow up activities and a grant application for funds to use on your Mix It

Up Day program. You can also register for Teaching Tolerance's monthly e-mail newsletter that is written specifically for educators interested in anti-bias issues and related educational materials.

It would be difficult to give high enough praise to the work done by Teaching Tolerance, not the least of which is developing, and providing free of charge, the highest quality educational materials relating to issues of equality, respect, diversity, and discrimination. Whether you use the materials already in your Toolbox or acquire new ones, you will find Teaching Tolerance to be an outstanding resource for your team and your school community.

 Do your school policies include a prohibition on harassment based on sexual orientation?

Most, if not all schools, have written policies that prohibit discrimination and harassment against both students and employees, based on race, religion, gender, ethnic origin and physical and mental disability. Prior to the passage of the recent amendment to the Maine Human Rights Act (MRHA) that added sexual orientation to its category of protected categories, most school harassment policies did not include prohibitions on harassment based on sexual orientation.

Because the MRHA prohibits discrimination with respect to educational opportunities, it has a direct application to all schools. Now that the new amendment is in effect, schools across the state need to review their harassment policies to make sure that they

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reflect all of the categories protected under the MHRA, including sexual orientation. The Maine School Management Association (MSMA) is currently drafting model policies, for both students and employees, that reflect the recent amendment. The MSMA can be contacted at www.msmaweb.com.

For an interesting team project, consider reviewing your school's harassment policies to determine whether they include sexual orientation and if they do not, contact the MSMA for a copy of its model policies. Team members can put together a presentation for school administrators and explain why the new policies reflect Maine law and should be adopted by the school. Simply put, a school policy that covers all of the categories protected by the Maine Human Rights Act reflects a school's interest in complying with applicable laws and regulations that apply to the administration of a school. It's also the right thing to do.



The Power of Words

One of the goals of the 2005 fall trainings was to help students think about the power of words and the damaging effect that certain words have on the people around them. Some teams went back to their schools and initiated projects designed to encourage members of their school communities to think about the words that they use and to eliminate words that demean others or have the power to inflict pain.

One of those schools, Cheverus High School, a private Jesuit school in Portland, initiated a "Words Count" project that

included a presentation to the school faculty and staff. The team decided that they wanted to focus this year on trying to eliminate abusive language from their halls and enlisted the help of the faculty and staff toward that goal. The team drafted a letter to the faculty and staff, requesting their help in addressing negative, hurtful words, and then read the letter at a faculty meeting. The text of the letter was as follows:

Dear Faculty, Staff, Coaches and Administrators:

As a team committed to fostering safety and respect for all students, the Cheverus Civil Rights Team would like to ask for your help in addressing a growing concern. We are aware that abusive and derogatory language has become increasingly common in our school environment. An excerpt from the Cheverus Handbook states the school's position on acceptance:

"Cheverus has as one of its goals, to foster respect for oneself and respect for all other persons of every religion, race, gender, age, ethnic origin, or social-economic background and lifestyle." [Mutual and Self-Respect Policy]

As faculty and staff, you have a large role in dictating how safe (or unsafe) a student feels at school. We acknowledge your efforts in combating physical and emotional abuse and we feel that often times it is well handled. However, our problem lies with the verbal abuse that many students feel they are bombarded with daily. Comments such as "That's so Jewish," "You're such a faggot," or "Retard" are unacceptable and examples of derogatory language that needs to be dealt with. Comments that are demeaning or derogatory based on race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, gender, physical or mental disability or sexual orientation simply cannot be tolerated in the school environment. We are asking that you, as leaders in the school, grant us your continued support as we challenge the student body to improve their language and ways. We ask that you do not allow such language in your classroom, and if you hear it, to address the comment instead of simply ignoring it.

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Studies have proven that simple name-calling and verbal abuse have escalated to physical violence. Also, such verbal abuse is a common factor in teen suicide. Our goal is simply to educate the student body as to how language affects others, and to create an environment where every student feels safe.

Thank you for your support.
The Cheverus Civil Rights Team

This is a fine example of acknowledging the current efforts of faculty and staff, but reminding them that more needs to be done and that their assistance is vital to the success of the team's mission. Cheverus' thoughtful, well-written letter is a model for anyone wishing to enlist their faculty and staff in a school-wide effort to reduce abusive language in their community. For more information on the Cheverus team's project, contact faculty advisor Greg Szkarlat at szkarlat@cheverus.org.

For anyone interested in more resources on the power of words and how you can educate your school community on this important issue, Teaching Tolerance has developed a 10 lesson curriculum, appropriately titled, "The Power of Words." There is a wealth of information in the ten lessons, which include: Male Bashing and Gender; Ethnic Stereotypes; Anti-Semitism and Hate Speech; Reclaiming Pejorative Words; Words That Reinforce Stereotypes; Social Justice Words, and Intention and Perception. The lessons are designed for grades 9 and up, but the web site states that many of them can be adapted for lower grades. They can be accessed at www.tolerance.org/teach/web/power_of_words/index.jsp.



This school is my school...

Here is another of the songs written and performed by the elementary school teams at their training last fall.

**This school is my school
This school is your school
From the outside playground
To the inside lunchroom
From the crowded hallways
To the boy and girls bathrooms
This school was made for you and me**

**Some Gang together
They think they're cooler
They whisper mean things
Spread nasty rumors
But I will not be
The one to pass them on
That's not the way I want to be**

**Down at the bus stop
And on the playground
The boys and girls groups
Exchanging put-downs
But I won't join in
Even when they dare me to
That's not the way I want to be**

**Here comes the new kid from Carolina
She sounds so different
They call her "whiner"
I'll be her new friend
And stand beside her
This is the way our school should be
This is the way our school will be.**

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I Am My Own Wife

The Tony and Pulitzer winning one-man play *I Am My Own Wife* is currently being presented by The Portland Stage Company. *I Am My Own Wife* tells the true story of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, a German man who lived as a woman and with luck and courage managed to survive the Nazis and the Communist regime in East Berlin. The story of how this transvestite managed to live when so many others like her simply vanished is spirited and compelling. How she survived, whether she collaborated with the enemy, and how her story came to be told are all explored throughout this award-winning play.

I Am My Own Wife is appropriate for high school students and there will be a show for students with a post-show discussion on March 21st. This is a show that could make a difference in the life of a young person struggling with gender identity issues and it will certainly help others understand the issues faced by people like Charlotte von Mahlsdorf. (*ed. note: I saw I Am My Own Wife last week and I was transfixed. The actor, Tom Ford, voices 35 different parts and he was absolutely amazing. It is the single best performance I have ever seen, anywhere. The story he tells throughout the show is riveting and his characters, especially Charlotte, however trite it sounds, come alive when he voices them.*)

I Am My Own Wife runs through March 26th at the Portland Stage Company. For more information on dates, show times, and ticket prices contact Portland State Company at 774-1043 or info@portlandstage.com. For further details on the student show and the

post-show discussion, please contact Dan Burson, Education Manager, at 774-1043, ext. 104 or e-mail him at:

dburson@portlandstage.com.



Planning for the May Statewide Conference is in Full Swing

If you haven't done so already, reserve your bus now for the Statewide Conference in Augusta on May 8th. The daylong program will be an exciting one with a variety of morning workshops on a range of topics that you and your students will be able to sign up for in advance. The afternoon session will include multicultural arts and entertainment designed to appeal to all ages.

The purpose of this conference is to provide an opportunity to civil rights team members around the state to experience and learn more about different cultures and religions, gender issues, living with disabilities, and much more. We heard you when you told us how much you missed this type of conference so we hope you all enjoy its return. Your registration packets will be arriving in the mail next month.

This newsletter is written and distributed by the Civil Rights Team Project, a state-wide program under the auspices of the Maine Office of the Attorney General. The mission of the Civil Rights Team Project is to increase the safety of high school, middle school and elementary school students and to reduce the incidence of bias-motivated harassment and violence in schools.

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