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Life & Arts

Students and teachers gather in Albright-Knox to take a stand against bullying

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Dozens of students, teachers and school administrators gathered Thursday morning in the Albright-Knox Art Gallery auditorium to celebrate the culmination of a regionwide project to fight bullying through the arts.

The program, “Healing Hearts: From Hurt to Hope,” included more than 500 students and 18 teachers from middle schools and high schools across Western New York. They created dozens of original artworks, videos, theater pieces and musical projects each designed to take a stand against the frightening new forms bullying has taken in the 21st century.

The program began with a tear-inducing presentation from Tracy and Tim Rodemeyer, the parents of Jamey Rodemeyer, the Williamsville teenager who killed himself two years ago after enduring years of taunting in person and online from his fellow students.

As a slide show of dozens of Jamey’s self-portraits and other pictures played behind her, Tracy Rodemeyer recalled her son’s long and grueling battle with bullies both in school hallways and anonymous online forums.

The Rodemeyers stressed the importance of individuality and self-acceptance to the assembled students and also issued a warning about the disturbing ways bullying has evolved on the Internet.

“Back in my day, that was what they did: shoved you in the locker, threw you down stairs, pushed you at the bike rack, that kind of stuff,” said Tracy Rodemeyer, adding she also was a victim of severe bullying. “You guys are going through probably 100 times what I went through because of cyberbullying. I always knew my bullying ended at 3:35 when I got out of school and got on the bus back home.”

For today’s students, who spend lots of time after school on Twitter, Instagram and other sites that allow for anonymous taunting, there is no off-switch for bullying. In perhaps the most chilling part of the presentation, Tracy Rodemeyer wondered aloud about her late son’s interaction with a student she called “Jamey’s biggest bully.”

“What shocked me was, because we have his Facebook (page) open, that girl that put him where he is was a friend of his on Facebook. He subjected himself to that,” she said. “Why would you put somebody who was bullying you, telling you to kill yourself, tell you you’re worthless, why would you keep them as a friend?”

After the Rodemeyers spoke, a choir of more than 40 students from City Honors School performed a medley of songs with positive messages about self-acceptance and affirmation including David Guetta’s “Titanium” and Katy Perry’s “Firework.” City Honors ninth-grader Destyni Cruz performed an original song she said was inspired by her own negative experiences at school and a desire to help other students through theirs.

“I have a different way of carrying myself and that has not won me a lot of friends,” Cruz said afterward. Her message, she said, was to “be an individual, not part of the crowd, because that’ll win you real friends, not people who are just out to get you.”

Students from Melissa Naylor’s class at Starpoint Middle School performed a silent theater piece set to Erik Satie’s “Gymnopédies” that painted a stark portrait of silent bullying through text messages and

argued for the need for bystanders to intervene. Students from Brad Curcio's photography class at Williamsville North High School presented a video that explored personal identity and anonymity.

Following the presentation, students toured the visual arts segment of the project featuring work by dozens of local students, which hangs in the Albright-Knox education corridor through Sunday. The work included portraits of Jamey Rodemeyer and other bullying victims by Starpoint students, mock action-figure boxes with anti-bullying messages created by Rich Tomasello's students and paper cutouts on bullying issues by Amherst Middle School students.

Kelly Tomasello, who co-organized the event with her husband Rich, said she was happy with the outcome of the project, a rare attempt to bring together voices from school districts across the region.

"There's something powerful in everything being in the same place at the same time with the same message," Tomasello said. "It gives the students a bigger voice together, and there's power in numbers."

For the Rodemeyers, who paused for a moment in front of the Starpoint students' portrait of their son before leaving the gallery, the event was a welcome opportunity to make sure that Jamey's story helps other teens.

"It's been a very long two years for our family, our friends and Jamey's friends, but his name's still out there," she said during her presentation. "It's not the way you want to make your mark in the world."

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