

Middle school students bond at anti-bullying summit

By STEVEN REILLY

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Corey Radcliffe, 17, a senior at Sussex County Technical School, knows what bullying can do to kids, and she has made it her mission to change it.

"I had a best friend who committed suicide in the eighth grade because she was bullied so much," Radcliffe said. "She inspired me to be involved in the anti-bullying programs and to try to make a difference in one person's life. If kids know that they are not alone, and that there are people to listen and to help, then things will change."



Photo by Tracy Klimek/New Jersey Herald
Children take a lunch break at "Who I Am Makes A Difference," the 2011 Middle School Anti-Bullying Summit, Wednesday at Sussex County Technical School in Sparta. The day-long event brought 30 students from each school district in grades six through eight to participate in team building activities and anti-bullying lectures.



Photo by Tracy Klimek/New Jersey Herald
Keith Hawkins, a nationally renowned youth speaker, talks to the kids, challenging them to work as a team in an egg drop exercise. "People will always forget the words that we say," Hawkins told the students. "But they will never forget the way the words made them feel."

Radcliffe was participating in the Sussex County Center for Prevention and Counseling's anti-bullying summit, Taking Flight to Change 2011, held Thursday at the Sussex County Technical School's McNeice Auditorium.

Radcliffe began her introduction to the anti-bullying programs when she was in the sixth grade, and she watched as her friend was bullied because of her foster care status. But despite Radcliffe's attempts to help, the bullies prevailed.

"She didn't think she could talk to anyone, she didn't think anyone cared about her," Radcliffe said. "But she could, she had people that cared. Losing her taught me not to take anything for granted. I love that these programs bring a lot of people together and help them see that we can all learn from each other."

The summit is a day-long event that brings 30 students from each school district in grades six through eight to participate in team building activities and lectures that promote tolerance and empower the students to affect change that will reduce bullying in their individual schools.

Keith Hawkins, a nationally renowned youth speaker, addressed the students and touched on a number of areas that are central to the issue of bullying.

"People will always forget the words that we say," Hawkins told the students. "But they will never forget the way the words made them feel. People think bullying is physical, but it is the words that bullies use that hurt the most. Stop using words to bring each other down, and start using your words to encourage each other. You will see that the bullies in your schools will go down after that."

Hawkins recruited 150 high school students from all of the Sussex County districts to be team leaders during the summit. These leaders guided the younger students through the activities and provided moral support during skill building programs. But the program is designed to teach the teachers as much as the students.

"These young people who are in high school and here as team leaders are the blueprint for the younger students. This conference doesn't happen without them," Hawkins said. "They made the commitment to be here, to come in early and stay late because they believe in what is being said here. Most of their friends wouldn't do this, and when they leave here they will have grown, they will have changed, and they will have the tools to affect change in their own lives."

Rhianna Lees, 15, proved her dedication to the program the hard way. The junior at Sussex Tech was playing on the varsity girl's soccer team on Saturday against arch rival Morris County Tech when she took a hard tackle during the game that popped out her knee.

The team captain refused to be carried off the field as she fought back the pain that each step brought, but she allowed herself to be carried into the anti-bullying training class later that night because she believed in the program and how it can help kids suffering from the emotional pain of bullying.

"I had been the victim of bullies when I was in middle school. I was afraid to say anything, I felt stupid and like I had done something wrong," the striker on the soccer team said. "My friends helped me and stood up for me. Now I want to stand up for others that may be going through it. They need to know they don't have to be afraid, they have people who will help them."

The message got through to the students who attended the summit. Fredon students Hannah Manning, 11, Annie Moore, 11, and Alexa Peera, 11, said they learned a lot from the activities and lecturers that the summit offered.

"I think the big thing was not to be afraid, to stand up for each other," Moore said.

According to Robert Black, the guidance counselor at Kittatinny Regional High School, the summit is a vital program that helps open the eyes of students, parents and educators alike in an invigorating and informative manner.

"We should have more of these programs. They get the kids involved and shows them it is OK to be kind to each other, that it is cool to be fair," Black said. "What they see here is embraced by the students who are given permission to affect change in their schools; they are given the tools to be a positive factor."

Joe Mills, 14, an eighth-grader at Franklin Borough School, was attending the summit with his classmates Liam Gorman, 13, and Brad Small, 13. The trio said the program helped them to realize that it is OK to say something when they see bullying, and just standing by as it happens is just as bad.

"This changed my view on bullying," Mills said.

"It was very moving, I have more confidence now to stand up and say something when I see bullying," Gorman said. "I really liked this program."

Becky Carlson, the assistant director for the Center for Prevention and Counseling, credited the United Way of Northern New Jersey for partnering with the center to bring the program to the county.

"This is our 11th year bringing this program to the schools. It helps empower our kids with the knowledge and skills they need to go back and address the bullying in their schools," Carlson said. "The kids see the bullying; they know what needs to be done. This helps give them the tools to make that happen." *Created: 10/22/2011*