Students Take a Stand Against Cyberbullying

Students seek to curb online harassment

By Michelle R. Davis

High school student Annabel C. was in middle school when she began receiving taunting, hurtful instant messages from an anonymous harasser when she was on her computer. After some sleuthing, the New Rochelle, N.Y., student realized that the instant messages were actually being written by someone she considered a friend.

“I was obviously hurt,” says Annabel, now a junior at the private Ursuline School. “I couldn’t understand why someone would send those messages, but it was worse to find out it was a friend.”

Instead of responding online, she says, she approached the student in person, asked her to stop, and told her they were no longer friends. But she also emphasized they weren’t enemies either. The online taunting stopped.

That experience, in part, prompted her to join her school’s Teenangels group when she was a sophomore. The program, created in 1999 by Parry Aftab, a cyberbullying expert who founded the nonprofit Internet-safety group WiredSafety, has 16 chapters around the country. The school’s Teenangels program has a policy that permits students to provide only their first names and the initials of their last names to the news media.

Teenangels trains middle and high school students on Internet safety, privacy, and security, and counsels them on how to deal with and prevent cyberbullying. The students then give presentations to other students, as well as to parents and other adults.

“Getting kids involved and getting their help to support policies to prevent cyberbullying is crucial,” Aftab says. “Kids respond when they’re part of it instead of having it shoved down their throats.”
Clearly, there’s a need for more education about cyberbullying, experts contend. According to a 2010 report on cyberbullying research from the Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project, up to a third of teenagers say they have experienced some form of online harassment, and 26 percent say they have experienced harassment through voice or text messages on their cellphones.

Online harassment has an emotional impact, says Sameer Hinduja, the co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Center, based in Jupiter, Fla., and an associate professor of criminology and criminal justice at Florida Atlantic University in Fort Lauderdale. Hinduja’s research has shown that cyberbullying is related to low self-esteem, suicidal thoughts, anger, frustration, substance abuse, and delinquency in the victims.

Michael Nehring, a sophomore at New Jersey’s Ridgewood High School who was a Teenangel during middle school (his high school does not have a chapter), says he joined the group after reading about teen suicides related to cyberbullying. He also was growing concerned about sexting—a practice in which students send sexually explicit photos of themselves via cellphone.

Watching some of his friends get bullied in both real life and cyberspace made him feel even more strongly that he needed to take a stand.

“You can’t hide from cyberbullying,” Nehring says.