As cyberbullying virus spreads, Shepard campaigns to stay out

By Bob McParland Tuesday at 3:36 p.m.

Shepard High School students signed large orange paper ribbons as part of the Pledge to Care campaign to promote awareness of and prevent cyberbullying.

Whether it’s simply a symptom of the electronic age or a modern malady of teenage life, cyberbullying has spread like a virus in the United States.

Fueled by the Internet, cell phones and other electronic devices, cyberbullying will victimize about 20 percent of students between the ages of 11 and 18 in 2010, according to research conducted by Dr. Sameer Hinduja at Florida Atlantic University and Dr. Justin Patchkin of the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire.

Hinduja and Patchkin, who founded the Cyberbullying Research Center, define cyberbullying as the “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices.” University studies have linked cyberbullying with higher risks for depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, family problems, delinquent behavior and academic struggles.

Conscious of the national trend, staff and students from Shepard High School this week worked to heighten awareness of the risk. Titled ‘Pledge to Care,’ the campaign involved promoting awareness of the consequences of cyberbullying, getting students to sign giant orange ribbons promising not to bully others, and distributing orange wristbands that symbolize the vow not to harass others.

Guidance counselors spoke with every Shepard student this week about cyberbullying during the school’s frequent advisory sessions, which cover relevant issues in each academic year.

“The idea started with the training that we’ve received regarding suicide. We thought that wasn’t enough, that we needed to involve our kids. Nationally, we’re seeing an increase in bullying, cyberbullying and teen suicide, so we felt something needed to be done,” said counselor Joan Alderden.

While teenagers can be difficult to reach, Alderden stressed that Shepard students have listened.
“The reception from the kids has been really great. I talked with our sophomores and seniors today, and they were just so attentive,” said Alderden.

If parents discover that their child has been a victim of cyberbullying, Hinduja and Patchkin suggest several actions. First, the researchers suggest that parents make sure their child feels safe and convey unconditional support. Parents should talk with their child and decide on a mutually agreeable course of action.

If necessary, the researchers also suggest meeting with a trusted teacher or counselor at school to discuss the problem. If the bullying involves physical threats, parents should call police.

District 218 specifically prohibits cyberbullying (students and parents must sign a use agreement in order for students to have access to the internet at school.) Students who engage in cyberbullying face disciplinary consequences.

For more information, parents can contact their student’s counselor at Shepard or visit the web site www.cyberbullying.us.