

Legacy of teen killed in Columbine coming to Lakota

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By Cameron Fullam

Staff Writer

Recent headlines about bullying at Lakota schools have prompted responses from the community aimed at getting to the heart of the problem.

One group of Lakota high school students decided to sponsor a program in September that will engage students and members of the community.

"We saw a need with all the things that have happened in Lakota within the past year. The fights and bomb threats and things, it's starting to get out of hand," said Bethany Dibble, 16, a junior at Lakota East.

As secretary of Youth in Philanthropy, a nonprofit organization out of the Community Foundation of West Chester/Liberty that raises money throughout the year to benefit local youth, Dibble said one of the best ways to address the issue of bullying is to hear from someone who paid its ultimate price.

Rachel Scott was killed seven years ago when two classmates at Columbine High School in Littleton, Col., went on a shooting spree through the school.

Scott's diaries and an English class assignment left behind a legacy that eventually became Rachel's Challenge, a program that inspires, instructs and enables students to bring positive change to their school atmosphere, said Program Director Pete Vargas.

"Through Rachel's story, we touch the hearts of people so that it goes to their heads and that they'll make a difference with their hands," he said.

The program has been around since 2001 and has been held at more than 1,000 schools around the world.

The presentation includes footage of Scott's life and the Columbine tragedy, followed by a 45-minute training session involving both adult and student leaders.

In the evening, speakers conduct a similar session with parents and community leaders, showing them how they can reinforce the decisions their youth are making.

Vargas said the program is not specifically focused on anti-bullying, but rather on what he believes will solve the problem: Rachel's Challenge.

"We just really get to the root of the problem, and that's really just looking for the best in other people," he said.

The challenge is pulled from an English class essay Scott wrote months before her death.

"I have this theory that if one person can go out of their way to show compassion, then it will start a chain reaction of the same," it read. "Until you know (someone) and not just their 'type,' you have no right to shun them. You have not looked for their beauty, their good. You have not seen the light in their eyes."

Caitlin Cummins, a senior at Lakota East shared Scott's sentiment during a roundtable discussion last week of residents and experts to address bullying in the community.

"Kids have to be aware and be empathetic. We're a self-centered society," she said. "It's so hard to break the pattern."

Lakota Assistant Superintendant Mike Taylor said Rachel's Challenge is part of an effort to address bullying issues from the beginning and set a tone that kids can speak out.

"But the answer is not just an assembly, it has to be an ongoing approach," he said.

Rachel's Challenge is coming to Lakota Sept. 6-8. For more information, visit www.rachelschallenge.com.

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