

# 'Safe Squad' Video Shoot Today to help Prevent Bullying

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By HANNAH VAHL, Press Staff

MIDDLETOWN — Local middle school students who have been involved with anti-bullying measures will shoot a video today aimed at bringing their methods to other schools.

Students from Keigwin and Woodrow Wilson Middle Schools have been involved with the “No Bully Zone” Program since its inception last fall. The program is funded through the Middlesex County Community Foundation and steered by Rushford, an affiliate of Hartford Healthcare, which offers prevention and wellness services.

Students in the program — the self-named ‘Safe Squad’ — offer their peers tips during school announcements, such as what bullying is and how to get help if you are bullied, and have conducted school surveys about name-calling during No Name Calling Week among other awareness-raising efforts.

Two of the messages that Rushford Prevention Manager Sheryl Sprague said students are sending to their peers is that they should speak up when they see incidents of bullying, and that the differences that bullies exploit should instead be celebrated.

“Usually bullying happens because someone is somehow different,” Sprague said. Students in the program, she said, are working to “raise awareness that being different is a very positive thing... (that) each person is unique and individual, and that is something to be proud of.”

Part of the “No Bully Zone” Program is an effort to spread it: a manual is being written which outlines how to start the program in other schools. The video that students will film on Saturday, Sprague said, will feature students talking about the program and how it is needed, and the footage will be shown to other school districts and business leaders in an effort to get them to replicate the program elsewhere.

Dan Zimmerman of TagTeam Productions is donating his services to help make the video, Sprague said.

Middlesex County Community Foundation CEO Cynthia Clegg said the “No Bully Zone” program started when she was approached by local business owners and donors looking for a service to support. She said after a brainstorming session on what they wanted to fund, they lit on a cause to which all of them could relate.

“Finally it hit everyone: each one of the people who participated had either been bullied or had a child who had been bullied. It was an ‘Aha moment,’” Clegg said.

Business partners who have contributed to funding the program include John Sullivan of A&A Office Systems, David Director of Connecticut Lighting Specialists and David Shulman of Suburban Stationers.

The 1999 Columbine High School shooting started a national conversation on bullying, with several states passing anti-bullying laws in its wake. Closer to home, the suicide of 15-year-old Phoebe Prince after she was tormented by her high school classmates in South Hadley, Mass., has again brought attention to the issue.

Locally, the mother of a Middletown High School student who was suspended for 10 days for having a knife in his possession said last week her son was fearful for his safety after having been bullied at school.

Cheryl Miller, the student’s mother, said her son now faces a year suspension or possible expulsion from the school. She said the bullying of him started in sixth grade, when his band participated in a Memorial Day Parade. He had marks on him afterward from being hit by fellow students with their drum sticks, she said.

Middletown High School Dean of Students Cheryl Gonzalez said the school has had two confirmed incidents of bullying — one last year and one this year — though she added that one case is one too many. Woodrow Wilson Middle School Principal Gene Nocera said that while confirmed incidents of bullying at Woodrow Wilson have remained steady from last year to this year, the number of cases of cyber bullying have been on the rise.

“It’s definitely a concern,” he said about bullying. “Kids need to know that it is not OK.”

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