

# Ohio community wages war on bullying

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Ja'Sean Smith, 16, a Buchtel High School junior, talks about his experience with being bullied in school before an audience of students, school staff and community leaders during a forum on Blue Shirt Day, World Day of Bullying Prevention at the Buchtel Community Learning Center in Akron, Ohio, October 3, 2016. Karen Schiely/Akron Beacon Journal/TNS

AKRON, Ohio — Kareemah Jackson knows how it feels to be bullied.

“I’ve always been a tall, thick girl, since I was a little girl. So, people always thought of me as being a bully, but I have always been a gentle giant, like my father. He was 6-foot 8-inches and he was very gentle,” said Kareemah, a 14-year-old freshman. “Bullying is a serious topic and it has a cycle. Children learn to be bullies from teenagers and teenagers learn to be bullies from adults. We have to stand up and break the cycle.”

## Stand Up 4 What's Right

Kareemah, who has stood up to both peer and adult bullies, created the slogan and designed the “STAND UP 4 WHAT’S RIGHT” T-shirts worn Monday by the participants at an anti-bullying meeting with parents and students at Buchtel High School. Kareemah started an anti-bullying campaign in sixth grade at Crouse School.

The meeting was sponsored by the Akron Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., Akron Public Schools and the city of Akron. About 40 parents and nearly 100 student leaders from the school district's middle schools attended. It was the local part of a national partnership with Delta's Grand Chapter and the National Institute of Health, known as the Mental Health Across the Lifespan movement.

## **Creating An Anti-Bullying Climate**

"As adults, we sometimes think we have all the answers, but we need to listen to the voices of our kids to understand what they are living and walking every day," said Merle Bennett Buzzelli, a counselor at Buchtel. "I don't believe there could be anything more impactful than listening to kids share their stories."

Bennett Buzzelli charged the student leaders with going back to their schools to spread a message of caring, kindness, inclusiveness and fairness in an effort to create an anti-bullying climate. She recruited three Buchtel High School students to share their experiences.

Ja'Sean Smith, a junior, shared how he is picked on every day because he doesn't like sports, likes to cook and is more comfortable around girls than boys. Dealing with the name-calling was particularly hard for him as he navigated through his grief after his grandmother's death, he said.

## **Bystanders Laugh And Watch**

"I pretty much stay in my own lane. I don't bother anybody. But because I don't necessarily fit into a category that some people think I should, people resort to name-calling," said Ja'Sean, who is 16 years old. "Not only is it hurtful to hear the words coming from the bully, but it is hurtful to see bystanders laughing or just watching. Somebody's got to stand up and say it's not right."

Ja'Sean's schoolmates, Tesha Strobelt-McCann and Marnetta Singleton, agreed. The two girls shared their stories of being told that "something is wrong with you" and being called "weird" and "ugly."

"I don't think people realize how powerful words are. Words are important. Don't speak words that you don't mean," Tesha, a 17-year-old senior, told the audience in the Buchtel auditorium.

Both Tesha and Marnetta, a junior, shared how the things people said about them caused them to doubt their self-worth. Fortunately, they were both able to build their self-esteem, with the help of family, friends and God.

## Everyone Is Unique

"Something within me said, 'You're worth more than that,'" said Marnetta, age 17. She told herself to let the situation make her stronger. "People can talk all they want, but you can't let what they say control who and what you are."

DeKayla Bell, a senior, summed up what her classmates said and shared some advice with the seventh- and eighth-graders in the audience.

"Nobody deserves to be treated that way. Everybody is unique and should be respected for who they are. You shouldn't call people gay or weird because they're smart," said DeKayla, who is 17. "And when you stand by and laugh or don't speak up, it's the same thing as bullying."

## Creating An Action Plan

Bennett Buzzelli and Joan Evans, who chairs the educational development committee for the Delta alumnae chapter in Akron, said the program had specific goals. They were to provide a meeting for safe and open conversation, to create an action plan to address bullying and to provide anti-bullying help to all Akron middle schools.

Kareemah said she hopes something was said that will cause students to consider what they say to other people and that will give them the strength to stand up and speak out when they see someone being mistreated. "Everyone is unique and nobody deserves to be disrespected, embarrassed and harassed. It's never wrong to stand up for what's right."

## Quiz

- 1 Which statement would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
  - (A) Different groups from the Akron community are working together to find ways to fight bullying.
  - (B) Students from Buchtel High School have had a lot of experience with being bullied by others.
  - (C) Wearing “STAND UP 4 WHAT’S RIGHT” shirts is one way people can show support for anti-bullying.
  - (D) The counselor from Buchtel High School is helping motivate students and teachers to fight bullying.
  
- 2 Which two of the following sentences from the article include central ideas from the article?
  1. *It was the local part of a national partnership with Delta’s Grand Chapter and the National Institute of Health, known as the Mental Health Across the Lifespan movement.*
  2. *Dealing with the name-calling was particularly hard for him as he navigated through his grief after his grandmother’s death, he said.*
  3. *They were to provide a meeting for safe and open conversation, to create an action plan to address bullying and to provide anti-bullying help to all Akron middle schools.*
  4. *Kareemah said she hopes something was said that will cause students to consider what they say to other people and that will give them the strength to stand up and speak out when they see someone being mistreated.*
  - (A) 1 and 2
  - (B) 1 and 3
  - (C) 2 and 4
  - (D) 3 and 4
  
- 3 Kareemah would MOST likely agree with which of the following statements?
  - (A) Bullying is only a problem in middle schools in Akron.
  - (B) People are only bullied when they look different than others.
  - (C) People should be more mindful of the effects their words have.
  - (D) Bullying can be stopped by standing up to people who bully.

- 4      What is the most important reason why Merle Bennett Buzzelli wants students to share their stories about bullying?
- (A)      She thinks that people need to better understand the effects bullying has on its victims.
  - (B)      She thinks that listening to kids is an important skill for parents and teachers to practice.
  - (C)      She thinks that spreading stories about people being kind and caring is very helpful.
  - (D)      She thinks that students' stories help support the anti-bullying organization in Akron.