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Tackling dating violence among teens

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TOWN JOURNAL
FOR TOWN JOURNAL

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Teen dating violence was the topic of discussion at a Jan. 8 seminar at Northern Highlands Regional High School.




PHOTOS/BRIAN REILLY

Gina Pfund, chief assistant prosecutor with the Passaic County Prosecutor's Office, discussing teen dating violence at a recent seminar at Northern Highlands Regional High School.

The seminar, which included a student component during the day and a parent presentation at night, was hosted by Northern Highlands seniors Sarah Pfund and Catherine Ramirez, members of the school's chapter of DECA, an international marketing, management and entrepreneurship club.

Pfund and Ramirez decided late last year as juniors that they wanted to do a DECA chapter project as seniors.

"One of the subjects that interested us the most was public relations," Pfund said. "When we tried to figure out what our topic would be, we came across teen dating violence as a possible subject.

"After talking about it for a while, we decided this would be the best subject to tackle, because not only was it something both Catherine and I knew was an issue among teens today, but we also knew it was an issue schools today don't address as much as they should."

Believing students relate to other students well, Pfund said the sensitive subject of teen dating violence lends itself to peer-to-peer discussion. Pfund recruited her aunt, Gina, the chief assistant prosecutor of the Passaic County Prosecutor's Office who, along with Detective 1st Grade Hector Jiminez presented a slide show and facts about ways to recognize dating abuse among students.

During the presentation, Jiminez said one out of five high school students has admitted to dating abuse, which he said is probably a conservative figure. He added that three main characteristics signify an abuser: they try to keep control over the object of their affection; they have no respect for themselves or others; and they have low self-esteem.

Gina Pfund explained that victims of abuse stay in a relationship with their abuser due to some combination

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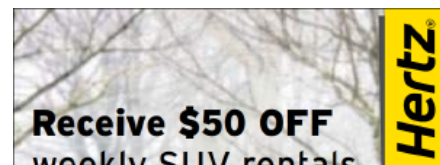
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of fear, self-blame, financial dependency, fear that their children will be left with no father, and divorce not being a viable option.

Jimenez said there are three phases in the domestic violence cycle. The first is tension building, where "anything ticks him off." Phase two is the explosion, and this is when the battering and yelling occurs. Phase three, said Jimenez, is all "hearts and flowers," or the honeymoon when the abuser apologizes and the cycle begins again.

According to statistics Pfund and Jimenez provided, somewhere between two to four million women report being assaulted by men annually and 800,000 men report being assaulted by women each year. Abused women are assaulted five separate times before they ask for help, and most women know at least one person who has been assaulted. Two-thousand women are murdered by their husbands or partners annually, and one out of four women are assaulted at some time in their life.

"Most domestic violence is never reported," said Gina Pfund. "And it often escalates during pregnancy."

After the baby is born, she said, the child often learns about abuse from inside the family.

The groundwork for how we treat others and what we accept from others begins during dating, Pfund explained, citing that 54 percent of teens report dating violence.

"It happens so quickly," she said. "It's often subtle and fast."

Jimenez said during the student presentation that men feel they have the right to be in control, while women feel they're responsible for solving problems and that any show of jealousy from a man is romantic.

The message to parents was as direct as the message to students: no one deserves to be abused; an abuser cannot be changed; talk to a trusted adult when a problem comes up; and discuss a plan to end an abusive relationship.

"Both Catherine and I wanted parents to understand the dangers of teen dating violence as much as we wanted students to be more aware of it," Sarah Pfund said. "Teen dating violence isn't the same today as it was when our parents were teenagers. Technology has completely changed everything, and we don't think parents understand the extent of how much it has had an effect on teens' lives today.

"Our hope is that our campaign has reached as many people as it could, however if we truly got through to only a handful of people we would be just as happy. Either way, we believe our efforts have paid off throughout the entire campaign. We aren't necessarily looking for people to take action; our major goal is to create awareness, because without awareness action cannot be taken in the future."

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