

Popularity Puzzle

Some Thrive, Others Survive in Classrooms

by **Kimberly K. Fritz**

Family/Community Life Reporter

Joseph Williams Jr. is a lot like other military kids his age. He enjoys sports and video games, and regularly participates in Fort Lee Youth Center programs. During casual conversation, he seems optimistic and easy to like ... not much different than most 16-year-olds who grew up as an Army dependent.

So, why would this young man become the victim of school bullying?

Last year, in the hallways of a local high school, Joseph experienced frequent harassment. On one occasion, a student punched him in the face for no particular reason that anyone could discern. The attacker, who was later charged with assault, admitted that he didn't even know him. He just targeted someone who stood out from the rest.

"Joseph assures me that everything is okay now ... that the bullying has stopped," said worried mom, Alicia Williams. "He's so eager for acceptance; he'll conform his way of thinking to convince himself it isn't happening anymore. Peer pressure ate him up and still does."

Alicia cited other bullying incidents at past duty stations, and said they were probably instigated by Joseph's physical appearance. He was born with his hands fused as if they were mittens and the premature closure of the soft areas of his skull left little room for his expanding brain. Having undergone reconstructive surgeries, Joseph's appearance these days is not dissimilar to those of his peers. More importantly and sometimes overlooked, his abilities and interests are the same as any average young man.

Joseph's story is likely one of many in our community, despite the programs that encourage youths to accept differences and teach peaceful problem solving techniques. Researchers suggest that one in four children are bullied every day.

The Virginia School Boards Association has designated January as Bullying Prevention Month. A partnership among school board members, superintendents, teachers and parents plays a critical role in creating a climate where bullying is identified, understood and eradicated so future generations of students don't face situations like Joseph's.

Now a junior in high school, Joseph is convinced that the days of bullying are behind him. He and his family agreed to share his story to help others.

He hopes telling his story will give someone else the courage to stop the harassment. More importantly, he wants bullies to understand how their actions affect their target long after the laughing, teasing and name-calling.



Victims of bullying may suffer short and long-term negative consequences such as depression and poor health ... or worse. Bully-related suicides were on the rise in 2010. Christian Taylor was enrolled at Grafton High School in Yorktown when he and his stepfather, an Army staff sergeant, were transferred to the area from Texas in December.

By the end of May, Taylor had hung himself. He'd endured months of name-calling and ridicule. The alleged bully reportedly told Taylor to "go commit suicide and get it over with." Taylor's mother filed a \$10 million lawsuit against the York County School Board and the principal of Grafton High School in July claiming school officials had failed to protect her son while at school.

"They were calling Taylor names, calling him weird. Why ... because he doesn't dress like you? Because he just came from Texas and he likes to skateboard?" said Alise Williams, the victim's mother, during a recent interview.

Taylor's harassment and subsequent suicide aren't isolated events. Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover, 11; Lance Lunden, 18; and Tiffani Maxwell, 16 are a few of the bullying-related suicides that occurred nationwide in 2010.

For military kids, being different is a way of life. They don't benefit from the lifelong relationships their civilian counterparts do. Every two or three years they pack up and begin their lives again often bringing different customs and styles to their new duty stations, sometimes making them the targeted outsider.

It's a problem that has garnered the attention of parents, educators and law-makers. CYSS programs Army-

wide incorporate a character-building curriculum into their offered programs. The Youth Center here uses the curriculum to reinforce moral awareness in development of character in hopes of producing a community sensitive to transcendent values, said Geraldine Ragin, the Youth Center's director.

In addition, CYSS helps participants to understand what bullying is, why people bully, how not to be a target for a bully and what to do if someone is bullying you.

"It's a six-week program provided by military life consultants which addresses the whole concept of bullying," Ragin said. "It is just one of the ways we've been proactive in the battle against bullying."

CYSS staff members are continually trained to recognize verbal and nonverbal bullying and Ragin notes that zero incidents of bullying are tolerated.

The truth is bullying is a constant problem that needs constant attention.

Joseph said his life is vastly improved over earlier school years. He has a circle of friends and enjoys their company. He says the key to surviving bullying is to stay positive.

He tries to convince his mother that he's OK but the past haunts her. Alicia recently received a phone call from the school. A teacher was concerned about Joseph's class participation, a noticeable change in his behavior and the way his classmates react to him.

"She says he's become an attention getter; they call him 'Swaggman'," she said.

Alicia worries it's another way his classmates are laughing at him while Joseph insists it's a harmless nickname spurred from his gaming tag used on XBOX Live.

His mother remains skeptical and vigilant.

"As a parent, it's my job to protect him," Alicia said. "I keep waiting for that phone call from the school saying he's been pulled into the bathroom and beaten again."

Next week, the Traveller will take an in-depth look at what lawmakers and local schools are doing to prevent the long-lasting harm inflicted on bullying victims and their families. The Traveller thanks Jaylyne McBride and Laurence Blocker for helping with the photo for this article.

Common Signs of Bullying

- Damaged, missing belongings
- Torn clothing
- Decrease in friendships
- Unexplained fear of school
- Mood swings
- Depression
- Aches and Pains
- Unexplained illnesses

Harmonious Hallways

Lawmakers, Local Schools, Youth Groups Use Education, Awareness to Battle Bullies

by Kimberly K. Fritz

Family/Community Life Reporter

“It’s an old problem with new twists,” said Prince George County Police Officer John E. Pearson Jr., when asked to discuss the issue of bullying in our schools.

“At a base level, it’s the same situation we dealt with as kids,” he said. “Boys fight about girls and girls fight about boys; you have stuff I don’t, so you’re my enemy – that sort of thing. The real difference is technology. When I was in high school, fights were limited to the witnesses on hand. Now, with camera and video phones, the whole school knows and kids are watching it on YouTube and Facebook.”

“Cyber-bullying” is a burgeoning tactic for Generation Y, Pearson noted. Today’s smart phones and social media have replaced yesterday’s bathroom stalls and battles behind the schoolhouse. With the click of a mouse, a bully can go viral with a campaign of harassment.

According to survey results detailed in a recent i-Safe report, roughly half of adolescent and teen participants admitted to being bullied online and about the same number said they engaged in cyber-bullying. The study further concluded one in three young people have been threatened online. More than 25 percent of adolescents and teens report they have been bullied repeatedly through their cell phone or the Internet, and more than half do not tell their parents when cyber-bullying occurs.

To counter the problem, grade school administrators and community youth groups across the country are adjusting their anti-bullying programs almost as quickly as new issues arise. Virginia lawmakers are taking a stand as well. They’re updating the five current laws and introducing new legislation like the “Anti-Bullying Responsibility Act,” which would add specificity to the mandated codes of student conduct for state school districts and require schools to have procedures in place to separate victims from bullies, among other specifications.

To encourage greater discussion and understanding of the problem, the Virginia School Board Association declared January as Bullying Prevention Month. The stated goal is to empower schools and parents to end childhood harassment.

“The entire education community – school board members, superintendents, teachers and parents – can play a critical role in creating a climate where bullying is not tolerated,” a VSBA spokesperson said. “It has been proven when adults and children stand together, bullying ends.”

Schools across the commonwealth have embraced the



COURTESY PHOTO

Students at Chesterfield County’s Alberta Smith Elementary School perform as the “Bully Busters,” a rap genre musical group.

movement, creating age-related programs that encourage and reward harmony in the hallways. Prince George County Schools – the district that includes Fort Lee – adopted the VSBA state model for a student code of conduct and definitions for bullying, said Director of Secondary Education, Larry Eminhizer.

“Each of our schools has an individual program created by administrators and counselors,” he said.

For example, the guidance departments at the county’s elementary schools work with individuals and groups of students to identify the issues of bullying and why it’s counterproductive to educational environments.

“All the elementary schools here implement a Character Counts program,” said Dr. Sharon M. O’Neill, principal at David A. Harrison Elementary. “We conduct four Character Counts Assemblies each school year. We feature skits, video streaming, songs and poems that target the character value being stressed. All the character traits can be interwoven with anti-bullying strategies as well as cognition of the what, when and where of bullying.”

O’Neill added that many of the local schools are looking to enhance and strategize programs that are more directly applicable to addressing bullying in today’s society.

Prince George’s current student population is 6,119 at five elementary schools, one middle school, one junior high school and one high school. During the two previous school years, a total of 14 incidents of bullying were reported. That represents about .25 percent of the student population, but the school readily admits that many bullying incidents go unreported.

In Chesterfield County, one of the largest school districts in Virginia, most elementary and middle schools use a comprehensive anti-bullying program developed by counselors and based on the county’s core values.

Shawn Smith, a spokesman for Chesterfield Schools, said the district takes seriously its duty to provide all students with a quality education in a safe, supportive learning environment.

“Our bullying prevention efforts and programs are ultimately tailored to the individual school community,” he said. “Our school counselors lead many of the bullying prevention efforts and proactive programs to prevent bullying and develop social skills.”

The reported statistics – 522 bullying incidents in 2008-2009 and 211 in 2009-2010 – show the pay-off of diligence and innovative approaches in Chesterfield schools. Yet bullying remains a serious issue, and the schools dedicated class time in January to discussions, programs and events that teach tolerance and discourage hostility.

Last year, the departments of Education and Health and Human Services joined with other federal agencies, including the Department of Defense, to create a federal task force on bullying. In August the task force held its first national bullying summit to bring an end to harassment and once overlooked as a rite-of-passage epidemic.

“It’s important for all parents to be vigilant and to ask their children how things are going in school,” said Barbara Thompson, director of the Pentagon’s office of family policy. “Create an open forum where a child feels comfortable to say ‘I’m scared’ or ‘I don’t like the way I am being treated.’”

Fort Lee families have a very important education advocate in the community, the CYSS school liaison officer. One of the primary missions of the SLO is to serve as a link between the U.S. military community and local school districts. The SLO can be a valuable resource for military parents who have questions or issues related to their child’s education.

“Even though I do not play a direct role in helping to prevent or to resolve bullying in the schools, my door is always open to parents, students and educators who need assistance,” said Nancy Elzie, CYSS SLO. “If a parent brings an issue to me that sounds like bullying, I refer them to the guidance department at the child’s school. There they can speak with educators and counselors who have been trained to address issues related to bullying.”

This is the second installment of a Traveller feature series addressing the issue of school bullying. The first article is posted on the newspaper website www.fortleetraveller.com. The final installment next week will focus on CYSS programs that promote cooperation and the functions of the SLO.

Character Counts

CYSS Programs Promote Strong Students, Citizens

by **Kimberly K. Fritz**

Family/Community Life Reporter

Bullying is a problem that doesn't go away on its own said Lisa Williams, the mother of Christian Taylor, a young man who hung himself May 31, 2010, after enduring months of harassment at a Virginia high school.

In addition to living the nightmare of losing a child to suicide, Williams has begun a crusade to eliminate bullying everywhere with a foundation named in honor of her son.

"People just don't get that this is a serious problem," she said "And it's getting worse. It's not about what clothes we wear, what activities we choose – bullying is about everyone," Williams said. "I am making it my job to ensure everyone knows how much bullying hurts."

It's a sentiment that national and local educational leaders also embrace. The Virginia School Boards Association began the calendar year with a Bullying-Prevention Month to empower schools and parents to end childhood harassment and ultimately prevent outcomes like Taylor's.

The Department of Defense and the Department of the Army are proactive when it comes to preparing children for life situations, including conflict resolution, from the earliest stages, said Penny White, Child Youth and School Services training and curriculum specialist at the Yorktown Drive Child Development Center.

"Character Counts, an Army-wide program geared to promote appropriate behavior, is incorporated in all of our curriculums," White said. "At this stage (toddler/preschool) we do not dedicate an isolated session about bullying – it is worked into daily activities that teach manners, negotiation skills and conflict resolution."

In the Army Strong Beginnings Preschool program, the almost school-agers are taught respect for others. The center uses the Second Step Violence Prevention Curriculum to discuss scenarios focusing on behaviors including teasing, taunting and isolation – all characteristics of bullying.

"Using a stuffed animal, we teach the children what we use our hand for – to clap, to hold, to write – and how we use

our mouths – to eat, to talk – and what we use our feet for – walking not kicking," said Jessica Turner, an Army Strong Beginnings program assistant at CDC Yorktown.

"We teach them about respect for each other," Turner said. "Everyone is allowed their space and to become accustomed in the morning before others can greet them," Turner said.

For conflict resolution, the pre-school program utilizes a "peace table" where children who are having a problem sit with a teacher and discuss the issue and work for a peaceful resolution.

"They sit down and we encourage them to express their feelings," said Daisy Nelson, program assistant for Strong Beginnings. "We want them to use their words to explain how their classmate's behavior has made them feel."

When children graduate from Army Strong Beginnings and begin their primary education, the School Age Center offers services and programs that continue to build on the Character Counts Pillars, White said.

SAC teaches appropriate behaviors at all levels with a variety of activities, said Randee Flowers, Youth Center training and program specialist.

"We engage the school-age children in a 'Daily Dilemma Discussion' every morning while waiting for the school buses," Flowers said. For older middle school and teen, or MST students, we utilize group discussions to focus on hot topics in our 'Let's Talk About It' activities on a weekly basis or as needed. The group talks through the problem and offers solutions and ideas for resolutions.

One teen who visits the Youth Center on a regular basis said she doesn't see bullying in her Prince George school. However, name calling is a constant and girls are the worst.

"They'll call each other names but neither one gets the better of the other," the eighth grader said. "It doesn't seem like bullying when no one ever gets the upper hand."

But the seemingly victimless exchanges could lead to more serious instances over time. Name-calling is one of the hallmarks of bullying behaviors.

Being knowledgeable about the scope of bullying in the first step in combating the issue, said ShaVohn Curley, the MST

program manager.

Curley spends a lot of time with the teens at the youth center. She said the open dialog and free path of communication she shares with the majority of teens who use the youth center stems from a mutual trust between staff members and the teens.

"We don't see a lot of bullying in the teen program," Curley said. "We resolve issues as they arise. We strive to ensure everyone feels comfortable enough to seek adult intervention when needed."

Outside of the confines of the installation, Fort Lee students still have a dedicated advocate for their educational needs. While the CYSS School Liaison Office doesn't play an active role in the prevention of bullying, the school liaison officer, Nancy Elzie, does help enhance educational experience through CYSS programs and partnerships in education. Elzie is the primary link between military families and the local school systems.

Often one of the first stops for incoming personnel, the SLO helps families make informed decisions regarding education. Elzie maintains relationships with the school board superintendents in Chesterfield, Petersburg, Hopewell, Colonial Heights and Prince George schools. She acts a conduit for information for all students including home school groups and home school students on the installation.

"I collaborate with the schools, installation organizations and community organizations to help facilitate the educational experiences of military children and youth," Elzie said. "From coordinating education transition to educating parents on the local school system policies, procedures and schedules to acquainting the community outside the gates about the military lifestyle and resources, I am here 100 percent for the military family."

For more information about the CYSS programs available on Fort Lee, call (804) 765-3848.

This concludes the Traveller's three-part series on school bullying. The full series can be found online at www.ftleetraveller.com.