

Tribune-Review

Western Pennsylvania schools called on to help halt teen dating violence

By Amy Crawford

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For the first few months, her new boyfriend seemed great.

Emily, then 19 and a recent graduate of Elizabeth Forward High School, was working as a dental assistant when a cute patient caught her eye. The two soon started dating.

"Probably six months in, he pushed me," recalled Emily, now 24, who asked that her last name not be used because she feared drawing her ex-boyfriend's attention. "I was hysterical. And then they give you the BS, 'Oh, I love you, I won't do it again.' And I believed maybe he wouldn't."

But the violence escalated, and soon Emily was fearing for her life.

She also was afraid to leave.

"It's like you're so brainwashed," she said. "They build you up, you're everything to them, then slowly but surely they push you down."

Her eyes watered as she recalled the abuse, but the tears never fell.

"I always said it would never happen to me," she said.

Dating violence is more prevalent among young people than is commonly thought, advocates say. According to the Department of Justice, women are most vulnerable to violence from a romantic partner between the ages of 16 and 24, but children as young as 11 have reported dating abuse. Boys and young men also can be victims.

Surveys by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have found that about 10 percent of high school students report being physically hurt by a boyfriend or girlfriend. The number rises to one in four if verbal and sexual abuse are included.

"It's a significant problem," said Terry Stewart, the education program manager at Greensburg's Blackburn Center Against Domestic and Sexual Abuse. "Kids think jealousy means love. Kids are bombarded by these things in the media-- violence against women, that the man should have the power."

The Blackburn Center holds free dating violence education programs in most Westmoreland County high schools. But schools often have trouble fitting such programs into an already packed curriculum.

"I think that it is an important topic," said Shara Augustine, who touches on dating violence in her health classes at Belle Vernon Area High School, "But there are so many interruptions, it's really challenging."

A bill that is slowly working its way through the state Legislature would require schools to devote time to educating students about dating violence. The bill would not appropriate any funding for the subject, but several nonprofit groups offer free curriculums for schools.

The bill is named for Demi Brae Cuccia, a 16-year-old Gateway High School student who was stabbed to death in 2007 by an ex-boyfriend, John J. Mullarkey Jr., now 21. He was convicted of first-degree murder last year and is serving a life sentence.

Demi's father, Gary Cuccia, has spent the years since her death working to advance the bill, which the House passed in March and now is with the Senate's education committee. In the past few years, 10 states have passed similar bills.

"It's about saving some girl's life, and saving a young boy from spending the rest of his life in jail," Cuccia said.

"I want people to remember my daughter as an advocate, not a victim."

While most educators agree that dating violence is a problem, some school officials say that teaching teens about it should be parents' responsibility.

"Anything we can do to help the kids lead a healthier lifestyle is good," said Monessen High School Principal Randy Marino. "I just don't know where our responsibility is going to end. Where is the parents' part in this?"

Cuccia argued that parents don't know enough about dating violence, and they're often unable to see the signs. "When you have teenage kids, they don't want to open up to you," Cuccia said.

Education committee chairman Sen. Jeffrey Piccola, R-Harrisburg, did not return phone calls to his office about the bill.

Though the bill is stalled, some teens are taking it upon themselves to educate their peers.

In February, South Allegheny High School students staged a mock fight between a boyfriend and girlfriend in the hall between classes.

"He pretended to take my phone and saw that I was texting another boy, and he threw my phone against the wall," explained Julia Welding, the petite, soft-spoken sophomore who played the girlfriend.

A crowd gathered to watch as the senior playing the boyfriend berated a sobbing Welding. "Nobody stepped in," she said, still amazed. "They thought it was real, but nobody stopped it."

The fight was staged by Expect Respect, a club sponsored in several Mon Valley schools by the Consortium for Public Education and Womansplace, a McKeesport advocacy group and shelter. It has gotten students thinking more about dating violence, members said.

"I think teens need to be aware that it can happen to anyone," said sophomore Kristen Kudla.

Emily, the Elizabeth Forward alumna, said she wished she had learned about dating violence in high school. Had she known the signs, she might have been able to escape the relationship sooner.

"It's so prevalent, and nobody says (anything)," she said.

For Emily, the final straw came on the way to what was supposed to be a romantic camping trip. Her boyfriend snapped, beating her as he swerved down a highway.

"He was like, 'That's it, you're going to die, you're never going to see your parents again,'" she said.

The boyfriend eventually pulled over the car, and Emily was able to call a friend, who came to her rescue.

Later, after he followed her home from work with a gun in his car, a case worker at Womansplace helped her get a protection from abuse order. Though she still has scars where her abuser bit and kicked her, Emily has moved on with her life.

She said she hoped other young women might learn from her story.

"Never think it will never happen to you," she warned.

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