

Anti-bullying dialogue is creating a culture of respect

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By **BRIAN WOODDELL**

The things he called me aren't appropriate for print.

They weren't appropriate for a person to say, either, but he said them. Repeatedly. In front of my friends and, on occasion, my teachers.

My middle school bully wasn't a fan of how I walked and talked. He didn't like that I was artistic and not athletic. So he lobbed insults -- usually sexual ones -- and missed no chance to bring me down.

My teachers did absolutely nothing to help me, but my parents did. They reminded me frequently that they loved me and supported me through the most difficult moments. They, without knowing it, kept me from making some destructive decisions.

Not every child is so lucky. Every few months, we see headlines about children who killed themselves to escape the torment of bullying. Such stories make me upset. I was almost that child.

The good news is that people are taking action. There are several national groups, such as the It Gets Better Project and the PACER Center's National Bullying Prevention Center, that are working to end bullying. My own employer, the Fort Worth school district, provides resources and training sessions on the issue. In addition, the Texas Legislature recently passed HB 1942, which provides schools with more tools to crack down on bullying..

Schools and activists can't do everything, though. It's incumbent on all of us to make sure bullying isn't tolerated in our community.

Joel Burns, Fort Worth District 9 councilman, is passionate about bullying prevention because he, like me, has felt the pain it can cause.

In 2010, Burns rose to national prominence after he spoke to the council about the bullying he faced as a child. The video went viral, and Burns went on to appear on shows such as *Ellen* and NBC's *Today Show*.

Burns said he's pleased to see that there's a growing national dialogue about bullying. Society's attitudes about the topic have changed even in the last six months, he said.

Stopping bullying, Burns said, "has a lot to do with creating a culture of respect." And that's something community members can do in their daily lives. Burns encourages adults to reach out to the children with whom they interact on a regular basis.

Burns suggests being intentional when discussing bullying with children. Instead of waiting for a child to volunteer information, adults should ask if children are being bullied or if they ever witness it.

He also suggests reminding young people that they have the ability and permission to step up and demand adult action. Bullied children need to know that adults will support them, Burns said.

For me as a teacher, this means making sure my students know that my door is always open in case they want to unload, scream, cuss or vent. I've told my students frequently that I'll do everything in my power to make sure they're safe.

For you, it might mean organizing a bullying-prevention discussion at your school, community center or place of worship or just taking a few minutes a week to ask the kids who live next door how they're doing.

North Texas is a diverse place. We have children from all socioeconomic, ethnic and religious backgrounds. We have straight kids, gay kids and kids who aren't quite sure yet. We have individuals with mental and physical disabilities.

There's one thing that unifies them, though: They all deserve bullying-free lives. It's up to us, the adults in their community, to ensure that.

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