

## Bullying is the hot topic at student gathering

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About a month ago, a freshman at Palmer Trinity School who is a member of the cross country team was tackled by his fellow teammates in what several people have described as a bullying incident.

The student and at least three of his teammates were "playing around" when he was tackled, said Marina Bryant, president of Palmer's Student Council. It was not until later that the student realized his hip had been fractured. The incident came to light after the cross country coach saw the students sharing a video about it.

Soon after, the three students involved were expelled and the injured student did not return to school for some time. A schoolwide assembly was held to discuss the incident and reiterate honor code expectations.

Palmer Trinity spokeswoman, Suzanne Calleja, declined to provide details about the matter. Head of school, Tom Reid, commented generally on the school's bullying policy in a statement to the Herald. Palmer Trinity is a private school, grades 6-12, in Palmetto Bay.

"By signing this Honor Code pledge, students, staff and faculty commit to acting responsibly, being considerate and being respectful of the rights of other individuals," he said. "I see that occur every day on this campus. Yet, we all fall short occasionally, so we need to remind ourselves of our pledge."

Marina and other students from Students Offering Support (SOS), a student-run organization that focuses on sensitive student issues, including bullying, said the injured student was called names leading up to the incident.

But no one noticed, Marina said.

"If you talk to the teachers and the kids who were involved they'll say they were shocked, they were good students and good teammates," Marina said. "They didn't realize what they were doing and they got punished for it."

"I took it as a learning experience, to try to notice more bullying to see if it happens."

Marina and about 50 SOS students from area high schools discussed the incident recently as part of their fifth annual "Bowling Against Bullying" fundraiser at Bird Bowl, where they raised \$2,291. Proceeds will go to the Miami-based Melissa Institute for Violence Prevention and Treatment, a nonprofit that runs 25 to 30 yearly programs to supplement Miami-Dade Schools' anti-bullying curriculum.

"When we started there wasn't much awareness of it on the part of school administration, or people who are in charge of programs," said Frank DeLaurier, executive director of the Melissa Institute. "They've gotten much more knowledgeable, often for unfortunate reasons."

Teddy Murphy, SOS president and a senior at Ransom Everglades School in Coconut Grove, paused the spares and strikes to lead a discussion on different forms of bullying.

"Bullying is something everyone faces, either directly or indirectly," said Teddy, who referenced the recent allegations of bullying in the Miami Dolphins locker room.

Stefan Zachar, SOS vice president and a junior at Westminster Christian School in Palmetto Bay, enumerated different forms of bullying, including physical, emotional and cyber.

"Maybe you've said something on Facebook and it's misunderstood," Stefan said. "It can really hurt someone. You have to be more aware and open. Instead of being a bystander, take notice."

Several students noted examples of bullying they had encountered, such as excluding people at the lunch table, and the posting of unflattering pictures online without permission. One student said coaches bullied student athletes who didn't perform as well as others.

Sometimes, it's not just the students who get bullied. According to Ransom Everglades junior and SOS historian, Chloe Gouraige, a group of male students bullied a history teacher online because of his sexual orientation. The students were suspended and have since graduated, she said. The teacher remains at the school.

"Even though you try to prevent bullying in school, there will be people who do it anyway," Chloe said. "They just think they're joking around, or they feel insecure."

The line between "joking around" and bullying is spelled out in the 2008 Jeffrey Johnston Stand Up For All Students Act that governs all K-12 public schools in Florida. Miami-Dade County Public Schools' policy against bullying and harassment further defines bullying as "systematically and chronically inflicting physical hurt or psychological distress on one or more students or school employees."

Yet students may not always associate a friend's actions with bullying.

"I believe [it's bullying] when the person is really hurt by it, if it's getting old to the person," said Chloe.

"It's very hazy and it's not well-defined whatsoever," Teddy said. "That is a very fine line because you don't know what your impact is—oftentimes the bullier doesn't know they're doing it."

This fine line may be one reason there are hundreds of "unfounded" reports of bullying filed every year, according to Deborah Montilla, district director of Student Services at Miami-Dade Schools. The anti-bullying programming she helps implement, with support from community partners such as the Melissa Institute, trains schools, students and parents to identify bullying behavior.

Data released by Student Services of the last three years indicate a "downward trend" in the number of reports in which further investigation confirmed bullying had actually occurred. In the 2011-2012 academic year there were 640 reports of bullying confirmed. The number of reports from the 2012-2013 academic year will not be released until next week, but the department projects the reports of confirmed bullying will tally 520. The data includes information from 340 schools, PreK-12th grades.

Although the specific number of reports citing cyberbullying or cyberstalking was not available, the statement said there is a "high prevalence" of bullying and harassment through social media outlets. This trend has been highlighted in a number of high-profile Florida cases.

In 2010 the proceeds from the SOS fundraiser went to the Josie Lou Ratley Fund. Josie Lou, 15 at the time, suffered long-term brain damage after she was attacked in Deerfield Beach in March 2010 by 15-year-old Wayne Treacy. Treacy knocked Josie Lou to the ground at her bus stop, kicking her head with his steel-toed boot. The two had had a heated text message exchange. Treacy was convicted for attempted first-degree murder with a weapon and sentenced to 20 years in prison.

Just last week, mother of Rebecca Sedwick filed a wrongful death suit against two girls in Polk County who were charged with aggravated stalking of their classmate, 12-year-old Rebecca Sedwick. Rebecca committed suicide last September after she was allegedly bullied repeatedly in person and online.

SOS member Jillian Woodard, a junior at Westminster Christian, said today's use of technology and social media leaves an "open door" for bullies.

"People post their life on it," she said, and it makes bullying as easy as leaving a mean comment.

Trish Ramsay, education director for the Melissa Institute, said there has not necessarily been an overall increase in bullying because of technology. Students who bully in person are likely to transfer to cyberbullying.

The issue is that cyberbullying is often more severe than other forms. Through technology, she said, "you are able to bully someone without any consequences to your own feelings-such as you see the hurt in their eyes, or you see them cry, or get mad."

"It unleashes their sense of irresponsibility," she said. "It's not just a local, state or national problem, it's recognized by World Health Organization as a global problem that affects us all."