

# The Intelligencer

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## Peers tell peers, ‘Be an upstander, not a bystander’

By Marion Callahan

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High school students say that at some time, every kid becomes may be a bystander—someone who witnesses bullying but doesn’t get involved. Students in Pennridge, New Hope Solebury and Council Rock are advising their peers to be an “upstander” instead — the person who does something to help make things right.

Annabell Lambert was in fourth grade when she walked into a school bathroom and saw four students had locked a girl in a stall and were throwing wet toilet paper at her.

Annabell, who was attending a Philadelphia school, yelled for them to stop then told a teacher, who intervened.

When Annabell arrived home that day, she learned her mom got a call from the school’s guidance counselor. “I thought I was in trouble, but my mom was proud after learning I helped someone,” she said. “To this day, I tear up thinking about how that girl felt.”

More than a decade later, as a junior at Pennridge High School, Lambert now realizes she was an “upstander” — and still is. Annabell is part of an Upstanders group of 28 students at the high school who visit younger students in elementary and middle schools in the district to discuss ways to promote positive behavior, prevent bullying and teach coping strategies if someone is a victim, or as in her case, a witness of bullying.

“If you see someone doing something wrong and you know it’s wrong, don’t just walk away,” said Annabell. “And if it escalates, that’s kind of on you. We can’t encourage the bullying; we have to do what we can to stop it.”

At a recent ceremony to honor the school’s first group of Upstander peer counselors, Pennridge High School assistant principal Dave Laboski thanked the 28 students for their positive influence. The Upstander program is sponsored, funded and led by the Network of Victim Assistance, or NOVA, which works with both Council Rock School District and New Hope-Solebury to spread common messages.

Mary Worthington, primary prevention coordinator at NOVA, developed the program seven years ago to tackle health and safety issues in schools and to encourage students to connect with their peers to help get to the root of a problem before it manifests itself into something harmful.

Hearing advice from a high school student is much different than an adult, M.M. Seylar Elementary School teacher Lisa Amary said.

“When it comes from someone they look up to, like the big kids, the message becomes more powerful,” said Amary.

Junior Abby Nuneviller said she was moved by how many students looked up to her when she stood in front of a classroom. She felt the responsibility to guide them with honest and relatable advice.

“They light up when we come in, and we know we have their attention,” said Abby, who along with her peers tried to empower kids to be upstanders.

At some point, she said, most kids become a bystander — someone who witnesses bullying but doesn’t get involved. She tells them they can be an upstander, a person who knows what’s happening is wrong and does something to make things right. She said she knows “doing the right thing” can feel uncomfortable and that it takes courage to speak up on someone’s behalf.

“These kids also open up to us because they feel we can relate,” she said.

She detailed one common challenge among middle schoolers.

“Cyberbullying and how people talk about their friends behind their backs is very uncomfortable for middle schoolers and they don’t know how to respond to it. I told one girl to say, ‘This person is my friend,’ so she can turn the conversation positive, instead of encouraging the bullying,” said Abby. “One kid who said another kid shoved him wanted to fight back, and I said no, but tell an adult.”

Senior Jessica Patton was approached by one middle school girl who was told by her peers she would have to leave the lunch table. “They had been calling each other names and being mean, and I told her to speak up for herself, but to approach the girl by talking instead of arguing and to remind her she couldn’t make a decision for everyone.”

Jessica said the experience in guiding younger peers was encouraging because she could see the younger students listened, asked questions and went out of their way to interact. The advice they give is guided by NOVA’s Upstander messages, she said. Some tips students share include:

Don’t join in the bullying. Support the victim in private — show your concern and offer kindness. Stand with the victim and say something. Befriend the victim and reach out to him or her in friendship. Alert an adult.

NOVA’s Mandy Mundy, senior director of programs and services, calls the program “going upstream,” addressing the social problems at the source.

“So much bullying is well-concealed, happening behind adults’ backs through texting ... but it’s sizable and impacting our youth every day,” she said. “How do we create a culture of students who believe upstanding is the right thing to do?”

Pennridge High School senior Aubrey Gilbert said it can happen with good role models. “I can see that they connect with what we are saying because they know it wasn’t long ago that we faced these situations in their same shoes,” she said.

Melanie Zuluaga, also a senior, said the program wasn’t just about giving advice or being there. “We can show them little ways they could take care of one another before anything happens,” she said.

“It could be a simple thing like opening the door for someone, befriending someone or speaking out about a problem they kept inside,” said Melanie, who was encouraged to hear that after one visit, a fifth-grade student exposed a

problem that was solved the same day.

Pennridge junior Chris McKinney said new middle schoolers approach him about the unique pressures of heading to a larger school and feeling that “urge to try to fit in.”

“Middle school can be very intimidating, so having good advice is really important at a young age when they start developing habits and mimicking them,” Chris said. “We encourage people to be themselves.”

Worthington, who launched the program in New Hope-Solebury and Council Rock elementary schools years ago, said the Pennridge program is a model she would like to see grow to all 13 Bucks County high schools. The program at the high school level, she said, is not just helping the younger students, but it’s leaving a lasting impression on the older peer educators.

“When they graduate and go on to a university or the work place they will be in our communities applying these principles in their families and jobs, knowing how to step up and not be a passive bystander,” Worthington said.

Melanie said being an upstander and a role model for younger kids taught her more about herself.

“You are not just teaching the kids; they are teaching you,” she said. “I’ve learned to be more positive about things and have more of an open mind. It’s changed me as much as it’s changed them and I’m grateful for that.”