

York students aim to form a "cultural change" by fighting cyberbullying



By Brock Weir

It might be a simple hashtag, but with #yeswewill, York Region students are aiming to change a culture.

The Yes We Will Campaign, a Region-wide initiative bringing together students from the York Region District School Board, the York Catholic District School Board, and numerous community partners, including the York Regional Police, was officially launched at Aurora High School on Monday morning.

Through the campaign, they aim to raise awareness of cyberbullying online, right in the heart of the matter, and eventually stamp out what has become a rapidly rising problem.

For the hundreds of elementary and secondary students in attendance ranging from Newmarket to Thornhill, cheers from the crowds and tweets from the floor proved these kids are more than up for the challenge.

Jacob Gal was just one individual prepared to accept the challenge. A recent high school graduate, his own advocacy work started in Grade 10 when he joined the Empowered Student Partnership, an organization that focused on combatting bullying, substance abuse, and other wide-ranging issues within schools.

"Cyberbullying was one of the biggest things we tackled," said Gal, who is now an active organizer for York Pride Week. "It has always been close to my heart because I have always thought you should treat others the way you want to be treated. At the end of the day, we should be nice to each other because there is no point in making fun of someone or hurting someone else for your own pleasure, or because you are hurting. There are other ways of working on your own issues without hurting other people."



Compounding the problem are the varying forms of cyberbullying, he added, which can sometimes go unnoticed even by those doing the deed. By raising awareness with this hashtag, and further initiatives that will form part of the #yeswewill Movement, people can be more conscious of their own actions and what to do about it.

‘I think we all have [been on the receiving end of cyberbullying], whether it is directly or indirectly, and we all give and get,’ he said. ‘It can happen in the smallest ways and it can happen in the biggest ways too. We might say something that is not necessarily directed to someone to make them feel uncomfortable, upset, or that we have bullied them. That is why we have to be careful of what we say because we could easily bully anyone, if you think about it.’

Alongside Gal was Anika Beckford. For Anika, the importance of #yeswewill was all too clear, having seen firsthand the effects of cyberbullying.

‘I was just bullied for my skin tone and also, at the time, my size,’ she said. ‘People were quite cruel about it. It was over text messages, but I went to a teacher and they actually helped. So, it does help to go to a teacher. This [campaign] is really important because I have seen the impact it has had on people around me and people in my community. I think we should all be part of the change because the suicide rate is up, social media has caused a lot of problems, and I think awareness like this on social media really impacts it in a positive way.’

This was a message shared with students by Superintendent Carolyn Bishop of the York Regional Police. Taking off her uniform jacket, and donning the campaign's purple shirt right then and there to drive home the point, Bishop said although last year saw a significant drop in youth crime across York Region by nearly 22 per cent, social media has created a situation that can often be difficult to tackle.

‘Bullying is not what it used to be when I was a kid,’ said Bishop. ‘With social media and technology, there is no way to escape being a victim of bullying. Victims can be tormented 24/7 through their computers, through their phones, and their homes are no longer a safe refuge from bullying that is faced in school. Physical and psychological impacts are devastating on the victims, their families, their schools and our communities.’

Underscoring crimes that can stem from cyberbullying, including some upcoming through bills currently making their way through the House of Commons, Superintendent Bishop added: ‘Crime prevention isn't just about education. It is about helping to cultivate a culture of respect, empathy and compassion. By working together, with all of you here today, we can change the culture of cyberbullying.’

This campaign brings together the shared resources of both local school boards and their respective Directors of Education were also on hand at Aurora High School to give the #yeswewill an added boost. Both stressed the responsibility each student has to be the change they want in their environment.

‘You have an important role because your voice is what matters,’ said J. Philip Parappally of the YRDSB. ‘You have an opportunity here to be leaders in educating your friends, your classmates, and your peers across the Region. As I look around the room today, I know that you are up to the task. I hope you leave here today feeling empowered, fuelled to create a culture of respect and trust within your school community.’

Added Patricia Preston of the YCDSB: ‘The campaign starts with you. You are the leaders. Yours are the voices your peers will hear and you will have the influence and the opportunity. All of us collectively make a difference. All of us must collectively be willing to say, ‘Yes, we will’ change the culture of cyberbullying so all students will feel safe and cared for.’