

Anti-Bullying Week

I have a confession to make. I have been bullied and I have been a bully. Those two things often happen together. People who are bullied, unless they are able to process their feelings about what happened with someone, will often become bullies, as they pass on the anger they felt to other people.

The bullying I received was nothing extraordinary. A much older boy used to give me dead legs whenever he saw me. He thought it was funny. I wonder if he had any idea of how much pain and upset and humiliation it caused me. Or how I had to try and blink back and hide the tears that I couldn't hold in from the other girls and boys in my year. Tears that came partly from the physical pain of being kneed in the thighs, and partly from the anger and hurt that someone was treating me like this.

But I actually don't think it was this physical bullying that affected me the most. I think it was more the negative comments, the put downs, the teasing and the humiliation that we all used to give each other every day at College. In Year 9, I came from little Wainuioru school, where I had been only one of 3 year 8 students, into Wairarapa College, where there were about 250 kids in my year 9 group and 1100 students in the whole school. I got used to the size of the school and all of the people there. What I struggled to get used to, was all the put-downs.

I remember one of the things we used to say to each other when something bad happened to you was: "Bummed out!". Which kind of meant: "Ha Ha, look something bad happened to you." Now I guess that doesn't sound half as traumatising as having a fully grown 17 year old giving a 13 year old such bad dead legs that he couldn't even walk for a few minutes. But the dead legs only happened a couple of times a week. The "bummed out"'s and other put downs were constant. They were every period, in every class, and every break time.

Of course it wasn't long before it rolled off my tongue as quickly as anyone else's. A lot of us behaved like that. But now that I am older, I can see how ugly, how awful and how damaging it was. I only have to think how that kind of behaviour would go down in adult society, to see how wrong it was. If during morning tea in the staffroom, someone tripped over, almost everyone would check to see if that person was alright. If anyone laughed at them and said: "bummed out" they would probably end up getting a formal warning from their boss. If someone on staff told me that someone had scratched their car, or that they had injured themselves, or that their relationship had ended, I and every other person on staff, would express sympathy, and concern and we would ask if there was anything we could do to help. If anyone smirked and said "bummed out, loser" then they would be looked at as a psychopath by everyone else.

When you enter this College, you are children. When you leave, our hope is that you will be adults, ready to fit in to the adult world. One of our roles as teachers is to prepare you to fit into society. Bullying will hinder you from doing that in two ways.

Firstly, if you bully other people, you will struggle to fit into the adult world. Generally, adults do not behave like that. If they do, they find themselves facing very serious

consequences: they may have consequences at work, even to the point of losing a job, they will be treated by other adults as immature and toxic, and in the worst-case scenario, may even end up in prison, if they cannot learn to fit into society's expectations.

The second way that it affects you is if you are the victim of bullying. It can leave emotional scars on a person that last well into adulthood. It can leave a person feeling angry, depressed, with low-self esteem and no confidence. When I look at some of those who were bullied worst at school, some of them are no longer with us. Some of them were so shaped by the anger and low self-esteem that resulted from bullying, that they ended up taking their own life.

Here's the good news: Bullying is an aberration, a deformity. It is not normal, nor is it a reflection of a person's worth. There may always be the damaged and immature few who bully others. And usually, in every school, there are one or two who are the main perpetrators. But my experience is that they are not the majority. And they will only get away with it for as long as the rest of us keep quiet about it and allow it to continue. But we also need to check that we are not sinking to their level too. We don't need to be dragged down into the mud of those kinds of interactions. If someone refuses to stop, then we keep telling someone else about it, someone who can do something about it, like a teacher or a Dean.

But let's all check ourselves too. Is our 'banter' really being enjoyed by all? Is it joking between close friends who all hang out together? Because if it's aimed at someone we don't hang out with, who's not one of our close friends, then it's not banter. It's bullying. It wouldn't be accepted in the adult world. So don't stay a child and accept that behaviour. Be a bigger person. Stop tearing people down and being a negative influence. Turn the culture of your year group around from one that is damaging to one that builds people up. And in the process you will become a much better, more mature person.