

[Other Towns](#)

- [Home](#) ■
- [News](#) ■
- [Police and Fire](#) ■
- [Business](#) ■
- [Education](#) ■
- [Obituaries](#)
- [Opinions](#)

- [Lifestyle](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [High School](#)
- [Youth Leagues](#)
- [Adult Leagues](#)

- [Fun](#)
- [Entertainment](#)

- [Pets](#)
- [Recreation](#)
- [Food](#)
- [Gardening](#)
- [Travel](#)

- [Blogs](#)
- [Town Info](#)
- [Government](#)
- [History](#)
- [School Info](#)
- [Organizations](#)
- [Your Vote](#)

[Multimedia](#)

- [Cars](#)
- [Homes](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- [Shop](#)
- [Classifieds](#)
- [Ads](#)

- [Letters](#)
- [Celebrations](#)
- [Columnists](#)
- [Health](#)
- [Religion](#)
- [Seniors](#)
- [Calendar](#)

- [Arts](#)
- [Books](#)
- [Dining](#)
- [Calendar](#)
- [Movies](#)
- [Music](#)

[News](#) 

With school violence on minds of many, anti-bullying program comes to Southeastern

By Paula Vogler

Fri Dec 11, 2009, 09:46 AM EST

EASTON - While most of the students at Southeastern Regional High School were too young to remember the Columbine High School shootings in 1999, the issue of school violence hit home to many of them just this month with a shooting at Brockton High School.

The victim in last week's shooting was 17-year-old Linanel Brown-Madison of Brockton, a former student who had dropped out, but was known to many at Southeastern. He was shot in the legs on Dec. 2 after school outside the gym.

The incident was on the minds of many this week at Southeastern, as the school kicked off Rachel's Challenge, an anti-bullying program.

Rachel Scott was one of the victims of the Columbine shooting. Her family designed the program to teach students that kindness and compassion towards their classmates go a long way towards curbing violence.

Justin Flannery, 18, who lives in Brockton and attends Southeastern Regional High School, said everyone had their eyes opened to bullying and the violence that it can lead to after a presentation by Jourdan Foran of Rachel's Challenge.

"The little things you say can hurt others and you don't realize it," Flannery said. "Me and a lot of my friends are still in shock that stuff like that would cause something like (Columbine) to happen."

Flannery said he doesn't consider his school to have a bullying problem, but said there are upperclassmen who sometimes pick on kids that are new to the school. He said the message of Rachel's Challenge was to get involved and reach out to others, including those younger students.

"For me I think it's so important that we teach them how to be a good human being," guidance director Christina Guarini said. "We have such a short time to work with them. Rachel was the kind of person who saw outside of herself and gave back to the community."

Anthony Matta, 18, also of Brockton, said he never thought something like Columbine would happen at a high school. He said he'd like to start doing at least one nice thing a day for someone, even if that meant just smiling at someone he passed in the hallway.

A training program held after the one-hour presentation gave many suggestions of community service activities in which students could get involved. Kelsey Rattigan, 16, of East Bridgewater, recounted an example of a student who collected a truck full of aluminum can tabs.

"He collected 70 cents per pound for it, and then donated the money to a hospital," she said.

Rattigan joined the Friends of Rachel group at the school, which will plan activities of their own throughout the year, emphasizing doing acts of kindness and going out of their way to help others.

Principal David Wheeler said kids today are barraged by negativity in the media — from television programming to news — and pretending it does not exist in schools does a disservice to the students.

Wheeler said overt bullying, like picking on someone, is recognizable to many. However, he said that more subtle forms of bullying, like excluding or shunning others, falls into the same category. He also cited negative humor.

“Be aware of what you say,” Wheeler said. “Be aware of how you interact with others.”

Rachel’s Challenge will involve suggested activities for schools to use during the entire year, and Wheeler said he hopes to have the organization return next year.

Flannery said he and his friends plan to work for the younger children in the community, raise money for charity or even help out at a homeless shelter.

In particular, Flannery said he and his friends would like to hold a benefit to raise money for the family of their friend Ryan Orcutt of Brockton, who was a sophomore at the school when he died in a motorcycle accident last March.

“A lot of the football players were inspired by the program,” Flannery said. “Ryan was a baseball and football player.”

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