



Dennis and Graci McGillicuddy: Allstars against bullying

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Published: Sunday, May 31, 2015 at 1:00 a.m.

Last Modified: Friday, May 29, 2015 at 5:40 p.m.

Wow! A rock concert and an anti-bullying message! Earlier this month, the nationally acclaimed Allstar Nation Tour delivered a powerful, anti-bullying message to students here in Sarasota through concert assemblies featuring popular young musical performers.

This vital message reached nearly 4,000 Sarasota County elementary, middle and high school students, thanks to a partnership between the Sarasota-based Embracing Our Differences and Allstar Nation.

In a 2014 Florida Youth Survey, it was reported that 37 percent of Sarasota County schoolchildren experienced some form of bullying that made them fearful, and 11 percent acknowledged staying home from school because of bullying. The statewide statistics are not much different.

These six concerts, sponsored by Embracing Our Differences and held at Riverview High School and North Port High School over a period of four days, were fun, flashy, lively and engaging and featured performers who have appeared on "The Voice" and "X-Factor," or have otherwise been nationally recognized.

The combination of music the kids could relate to with emotionally charged personal stories and advice from talented peers made for a powerful, educational experience.

As co-founders of Embracing Our Differences, we witnessed firsthand how this form of learning can impact our children and change lives for the better. We were moved not only by the talent but also by the courage of these young performers.

For example, Branden Mendoza spoke from the heart about the taunting and beatings he endured in school because of his nonconformity. He told the kids how he fought through suicidal thoughts by asking for, and getting, the help and support he needed. Clearly, Sarasota's young people were just as moved as we were. The enthusiasm during the assemblies was palpable. The understanding in their eyes was as bright as day. They got the message.

The students we spoke with after the concerts told us that the show had changed the way they'll think and act about bullying in the future. They don't want to look the other way anymore; they want to adopt the motto of the tour, which is report, support and defend!

The impact of The Allstar Nation Tour in our area has only just begun. Embracing Our Differences intends to keep the conversation alive throughout the year.

We recently partnered with the Sarasota County school district and educators from the Anti-Defamation League and Facing History and Ourselves to create "Embrace Courage: Bully Prevention in Schools," a three-day workshop designed to give area educators the skills and tools they need to take a stand against bullying on and off campus. The inaugural workshop is June 3-5, and is funded, in part, by grants from the Kates Foundation, The Jewish Federation of Sarasota-Manatee and the Gulf Coast Community Foundation.

Bullying is an issue that is affecting more and more of our youth. The effects can be life-altering and life-long. As we all have a stake in the future of our children, giving them the tools to fight this scourge is part of the responsibility we all have to create a better world for our children.

Embracing Our Differences looks forward to continuing its participation in this important community effort.

Dennis and Graci McGillicuddy are the co-founders of Embracing Our Differences. They live in Sarasota.