

Palm Beach Daily News

Palm Beach students in Do the Write Thing Challenge share ways to combat violence

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Internet social networks such as Facebook and My Space, text messaging and cell phone cameras give young people myriad ways to toss jabs at peers they don't like.

That teasing and taunting can escalate into physical violence.

It's a violent world, according to Cynthia Teinowitz of Palm Beach, a seventh-grader at Bak Middle School of the Arts.

In a poem written for the Do the Write Thing Challenge, an annual program of the National Campaign to Stop Violence, Teinowitz said images and news of violence on television, the radio and newspapers are hard to escape.

"It clouds up the air I breathe, seeps deep beneath my skin. It fills the minds of friends and follows me everywhere I go," Teinowitz wrote.

Drugs, drinking and a loss of morality are to blame, she claims in her poem.

Other Palm Beach students who participated were Caleb Cheng, John Hench, Robert Langdon, Bailey Bone and Carlton Bone, all of whom attend Bak. They were among more than 11,000 contestants countywide.

Cheng, 13, said he has been on the receiving end of hurtful text messages that disparaged his friends.

"I think it's common," he said.

A friend and classmate got into a fight after another boy criticized his singing skills. The friend is a member of the chorus, Cheng said. The boy antagonized his friend by calling him names and pushing him around. Cheng's friend was embarrassed that he allowed himself to be drawn into an altercation.

"He didn't pick the fight, but he was sorry he fought back," Cheng said.

The poem Cheng created focuses on using virtues such as patience and kindness to prevent youth violence.

"As a Christian, I believe Jesus taught us to abide or live by the fruits of the spirit," Cheng said.

Bill Bone, of Palm Beach, an attorney and chairman of the National Campaign to Stop Violence program in Palm Beach County, said there is an epidemic of youth violence in South Florida.

"We were told by (Palm Beach County Sheriff) Ric Bradshaw there are over 30 known gangs in Palm Beach County, many of whom recruit new members from the middle school student population," Bone said.

Bak and other schools serving students from higher-income families are unlikely to have students in gangs, Bone said, but issues of bullying and cyberbullying at those schools are very real.

"It's no different than when we were in school," Bone said. "Kids bully, whether it's for weight or sexual orientation or race or (income) or the way they dress."

He thanked the Fanjul family of Palm Beach for stepping up four years ago to underwrite the local program.

"Lourdes and Pepe wanted to do something to help kids," Bone said. "The goal is to ask the kids most affected by violence to come up with a solution."

Finalists were honored May 3 during a ceremony at the Kravis Center. A panel of judges selected Kaaza Lightbourne, of Congress Middle School, and Christian Correa, of Palm Springs Middle School, out of 165 finalists from 17 schools, to be the county's 2009 representatives in the anti-violence campaign.

They may participate in a ceremony in Washington, D.C., in July recognizing contest "ambassadors" from across the country.