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Wake Up, Help N.M. Kids Stand Up to Violence, Bullies

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Recently the media covered the sickening attack by three teenagers on a terrier puppy in Alamogordo. One of the questions people are inevitably asking is "why would these teenagers feel it necessary to abuse an animal?"

The fact that these children found it acceptable to torture an animal is one sign that they are dealing with issues that may or may not be surfacing elsewhere: fear, anger and anxiety, violence, hatred and discrimination.

Unfortunately, these are the kinds of issues that often motivate violence against others. Some children decide to react to that pressure with rage against those who can't defend themselves, whether a 9-month-old puppy, someone less fortunate than they are, or a fellow classmate.

It is imperative that our children— especially in this day and age— learn ways to recognize and combat the pressure they are under. Raising children to become responsible adults— adults who will respect each other and work to improve our world— is a goal to which all of us, as members of the community, should aspire.

That's why I created the New Mexico Human Rights Projects. As the executive director of NMHRP, I'm guided by a need to combat violence, discrimination and bullying, and the hatred upon which these destructive efforts are often grounded.

Recently, the Albuquerque Journal reported on our essay contest titled "Bullying at School— Not Child's Play." More than 400 students from around New Mexico submitted essays discussing why they bullied people or how they reacted to being bullied. Some of the most gripping essays involved stories of those who stood by and allowed others to be bullied and why they did nothing to stop it.

The essay contest is but one component of a larger effort to give our youth the tools they need to combat destructive, hurtful behavior. Our children must think critically about the choices they make when confronted with discrimination, hatred and violence. Looking at the pain our youth deal with on a daily basis should be a wake-up call to educators throughout New Mexico.

In addition to our annual essay contest, NMHRP provides teacher training workshops, student workshops, a speakers bureau and a unique student-run exhibit. Choices: Through the Eyes of Students is a 21-panel, bilingual, student-run exhibit that travels to five middle schools and high schools throughout New Mexico each year and is used to teach fellow students about the decisions that young people made during the Holocaust.

Nobel Peace Prize winner Nelson Mandela once said, "No one is born hating another person because of the color of their skin, religion or background. Hatred and intolerance have to be learned and if they can be learned, so can love and tolerance, which are more natural to the human heart."

He went on to say, "It is only through education that we find the wisdom to trade hate for compassion."

What are we, as adults, doing about the pressure that leads to these violent acts? Are we

sitting on the couch, watching TV and lamenting the "decline of our culture?" Or are we taking constructive action to change the behavior and attitude of our children?

Providing the teachers of today with the necessary tools to strengthen our children's character is an often neglected, yet critical, component of building a strong, ethically sound and tolerant society.

I'm challenging all members of our community to be good role models and help NMHRP in its mission to raise our kids into adults with strong moral and ethical standards.

I am certain that just saying "Character Counts" doesn't cut it anymore. We need stronger programs so kids can examine their own behavior. It's not until they have to write about something that impacts them personally, or study their own actions, that they can start to address how they will change those actions in the future.

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