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Essays Overwhelm Judges; Children Detail Effects of Bullying

By Leann Holt

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More than 400 middle and high school students unleashed a torrent of grief and guilt through hundreds of pages of essays— and the subject was bullying.

The occasion was an essay contest sponsored by the New Mexico Human Rights Projects.

The emotional impact on the 19 local writers, educators, children's court judges, university professors and journalists who judged the entries April 28 was enormous.

"I was really knocked out—it's really stayed with me," said Gene Grant, a local columnist and screenwriter.

"I never fully bought that the pressures of kids today are that different than when I was coming up in the late '60s and '70s. But that idea got really challenged for me."

Thirty-four high school and 380 middle school students from 17 New Mexico communities submitted essays for the contest, titled "Bullying at School— Not Child's Play."

A winner from both age groups will be announced Friday. Grand prizes are trips to the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, courtesy of the Human Rights Projects, which educates and trains students and teachers in ways to live peacefully and respectfully with others.

Students wrote about bullying from the perspective of victim, perpetrator and bystander. The reflections included moments of self-recrimination, justification, regrets and lots of whys.

Victims wrote of being slapped, called names and put in headlocks while recalling the shame they felt.

Bullies wrote of trying to fit in and hurting others so they wouldn't be bullied themselves.

And bystanders expressed some of the most angst of all, writing of feeling helpless, afraid and guilty.

"Oh, my God— the things our kids go through, said judge Dolores Griego, an Albuquerque school board member.

"It breaks your heart. You just don't want them to hurt like this."

One young man wrote that he and his friend were bullied every day on the school bus. Telling adults didn't help much— a recurring theme in the essays.

The friend spent days hiding in the bosque to avoid the bus. The young man finally snapped and beat the perpetrator.

"It breaks people on the inside and it breaks them on the outside," he wrote. "I got suspended, but it was worth it."

Many bullies expressed regret for their actions.

"I chose to remain popular with jerks," one student said of why she had bullied a slightly developmentally disabled boy. "I was disappointed in my behavior."

One girl wrote of standing by while her friend was taunted for years. The victim was

eventually beaten and almost drowned in a bathroom. She moved away shortly thereafter.

"I kept thinking 'What can I do, ' the girl wrote. "I should have done more. I never got to say goodbye."

Regina Turner, executive director of the Human Rights Projects, said the essays are evidence that children need to be taught basic kindness and tolerance.

"We are a society that is not affected by violence anymore," she said. "As adults, we need to be better role models in how we treat other people."

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