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The Mercyhurst Preparatory School Ophelia Club: Striving to Build Safe Social Climates

The Mercyhurst Prep Ophelia Club has been working together to educate adolescents and teens about the dangers of peer aggression. Starting with a group workshop in August, the MPS Ophelia girls have strived to become more aware of the importance of establishing a safe social climate everywhere they go. The club consists of over 50 students, which, in comparison to previous years, is an increase of about 30 members. The club meets twice a month for an hour after school. The meetings generally consist of discussion, crafts, and presentation preparation. This year, club members signed a contract to affirm that they believe in all that the Ophelia Club stands for, and to declare

their official commitment to the club and its mission. In addition, the club has had two guest speakers. Some topics they wish to cover before the end of the school year include



sexual assault/ empowerment for girls, invalidation, or the attempt to diminish someone's feelings, and proactive versus reactive aggression. Every year, in order to spread the message of the Ophelia Project, the club executes presentations in the Spring. This year, the club began presentations in the fall to address bullying before it became a larger issue. So far this year, the club has presented during MPS Fresh-

man Welcome Week, at the MPS sophomore retreat, and at OLMC School. In the upcoming months, the MPS Ophelia officers will train newer members of the Ophelia Club so that all members are fully prepared to present to local Catholic grade schools beginning in April. MPS Ophelia Club Secretary, Emily Schultz, says "As a result of joining the MPS Ophelia club, I have learned so much. I love the idea of reaching out to other girls and giving them the tools necessary to relieve themselves of the pain that bullying brings." The MPS Ophelia Club has passionate leaders with a strong desire to help targets, empower bystanders, and educate aggressors to manifest safer social climates everywhere they go.

"It felt like the worst thing that could ever happen. I was not eating, I was not sleeping because of how it was affecting my daughter. At the time, it was such a shock but it ended up being the biggest blessing in the sense that it taught us both how to treat people and handle tough situations."

*-Pam Scrimenti,
mother of Maria*

Bullied By Best Friend: My Experience

When I was in eighth grade, I was the victim of a classic case of relational aggression amongst girls. I had spent most of my Christmas break with my best friend Lauren. We were together almost every single day, and when we were not physically together, we would spend hours talking on the phone. But when we returned to school after break, things took a turn for the worst. The girl who I thought was my best friend had become my worst enemy. The bullying began with blackmail, gossip, taunting, and rumors. "What did I do!?" I would think to myself as I lay on my bed sobbing at night. I was losing my best friend; my best friend since sixth grade. Then came the pure unadulterated relational aggression, or the attempt to damage one's relationships with others. Lauren gathered some of my close friends and most of the boys in my grade and made every effort to turn them against me. They would post things in their AIM profiles like "M.S.M.D.", the acronym for "Maria Scrimenti Must Die". For two weeks, I felt completely alone. I would go home after school and just cry my teenage eyes out. However, with the help of my outstanding guidance counselor, I learned to conduct myself in a manner that would allow me to maintain my dignity without adding fuel to the fire. I acted in a civil manner and did not let Lauren (or her clan) know that their actions were hurting me. My classmates began to see that what Lauren was doing was wrong. They eventually came around and ultimately, I came out on top. I was able to restore the friendships I chose to maintain, as well as create new ones. I learned a great deal from this unfortunate incident. I know it sounds twisted, but this experience was such a blessing. I was able to grow and mature as I learned valuable life lessons. My ultimate reward did not come until high school, though, when I was elected President of our Ophelia Club. Today I strive to educate on the damaging effects of peer aggression. I want girls to know that they can get through these hurtful experiences, just like I did, and actually end up coming out a better person.



Maria, as a high school senior

Employee Highlight: Lora Caldwell

Lora Caldwell is the volunteer services manager at the Ophelia Project. She has volunteered at the Ophelia Project for the past twelve years. After three years of volunteering, she became a staff member, and has remained so for nine years. Lora's experiences with her two daughters' dealings with aggression inspired her to get involved in the Ophelia Project. Lora has always had an interest in volunteering, as she has always done volunteer work for different organizations such as Mothers Against Teen Violence, Erie Peace Initiative, the Neighborhood Arthouse, and Clara Ward's Development Center. Some of Lora's responsibilities at the Ophelia Project are to find, train, and place volunteers. She mostly targets local colleges and high schools

in finding volunteers. Lora also likes to involve senior citizens as much as possible because of the time, maturity, and wisdom that they offer. In addition, Lora relies on volunteermatch.com to find volunteers. Lora said one of the major problems she faces in working as volunteer services manager is with vol-



unteer commitment. Lora relies heavily on her volunteers which makes it very complicated when they do not show up. Lora did qualify this by saying that there are many volunteers who have never missed. The most rewarding aspect of Lora's job is in "definitely being a mentor myself and working with children," she said. Lora also said she is inspired by volunteers that are excited, enthusi-

astic, and committed. When asked to describe her role at the Ophelia Project in one word, "The first thing that comes to mind is inspirational," Lora said. However, after giving it some thought, Lora decided that a better word to describe her job is "commitment". She stressed how incredibly important commitment is in dealing with volunteer work. Some of Lora's different service projects in which she is currently involved include the STAR (Self-Esteem, Teamwork, Attitude, Respect) Class at the Neighborhood Art House, and *Girl Talk*, which is also a class at the Neighborhood Art House. In addition, Lora plans to implement a *Boy Talk* class, in which she will use pieces of the relational aggression curriculum for boys. The class will consist of 9, 10, and 11 year-old boys. This will be a five-week program focusing on anti-bullying and friendship.

Employee Highlight Cont...

When asked whether or not she thinks that peer aggression needs more attention in schools today, Lora replied with a very confident “Yes... Absolutely.” Lora pointed out how teachers and school districts often choose to ignore aggressive behavior among students. She noted that a lot of things happen outside of school, but ultimately effect students in school as well. “It’s all the same community,” Lora said.

She described the lack of action taken by schools to monitor bullying as inexcusable and disappointing. Moreover, Lora has a strong passion for reaching out to adolescents and teaching them positive life skills. Her enthusiasm for volunteering helps everyone she works with to shine to their full potential. Lora strives to make a difference in the lives of everyone she meets. Her experiences with volunteer work

make her irreplaceable in her role at the Ophelia Project.



Bystander Strategies: On the Spot

The Power of One

The key for bystanders is to intervene without putting themselves in harm’s way, or by becoming aggressive themselves. In a bullying situation, how can you help the target and shift the power away from the aggressor?

Could you...

- Change the subject?
- Use humor to diffuse the situation?
- Not laugh when someone is being made fun of?
- Suggest that it’s not worth it?

- Talk to the target afterward to offer your support?
- Talk to a trusted adult?
- Stop a hurtful rumor, regardless of whether there is truth in it?



- Calmly speak to the aggressor afterward?
- Mention the rules, and possibility of the consequences?

- Physically move toward the target and away from the aggressor?
- Not pass on a hurtful text?
- Include someone who is being excluded?
- Talk with friends about ways to support the target?

**Your Single Act Can
Make A World Of
Difference**

Victim Strategies: Coping

The key for the victim is to know how to handle their present situation. How the victim responds to the aggressor(s) can determine for how long they will be bullied and to what extent.

- Tell someone
 - Gain a new perspective
 - Get someone on your side
- Be an actress
 - Own your feelings but do not show the bully that they are getting to you
- Be civil
 - Be friendly at a distance
 - Do not fight fire with fire
 - Do not go out of your way to be nice

Practice self-affirmations

"No one can take away my worth"

"I am an amazing, intelligent person"

- Take up a new hobby
 - Exposure to new people
 - Be part of a team
- Encourage your friends to stand up for you
 - Even, if not especially, when you are a victim, you can empower a bystander

- Try not to be alone
 - Don't give the bully a perfect opportunity
 - Remember, there is strength in numbers
- Step out of your comfort zone
 - Your least likely companion could become your closest ally



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The Ophelia Project serves youth and adults who are affected by relational and other non-physical forms of aggression by providing them with a unique combination of tools, strategies, and solutions. To achieve long-term systemic change, we help build capabilities to measurably reduce aggression and promote a positive, productive environment for all.

We are dedicated to creating safe social climates.

For more information on our line of curriculum and products, visit www.opheliaproject.org or call us at 814-456-5437.