LOCAL NEWS

Author speaks from experience in moving talk about bullying

Tells Msgr. Donovan students how harassment affected her

ANTI-BULLY

AUTHOR JODEE BLANCO'S TIPS:

- If you're being picked on, remember there is nothing wrong with you. The things that make you unique and special are often the reasons why you are being targeted.
- If you're being bullied, find an authority figure you can talk to about it. If you don't feel like you can tell your parents, tell someone else in a position of authority, like a teacher, an older sibling or a relative.
- If someone is taunting you, tell that person to stop. It may not work at first, but if you continue to tell them to stop, they will eventually learn to respect you.
- Find social activities away from your school where you can develop friendships and confidence. You can often find those activities in another town or school district.

By JEAN MIKLE
TOMS RIVER BUREAU

TOMS RIVER — She had garbage and rotten food smeared on the inside of her locker after she stuck up for a boy with Down syndrome.

Knocked down by a group of popular kids outside her middle school, she had handfuls of snow shoved into her mouth and ears. In high school, she was slammed into lockers and taunted by kids who called her "God's worst mistake" and "retard lover," and told her everyday that "Nobody likes you."

"I'm sure if I see somebody just standing alone, I'll go up and say 'Hi.' I didn't know that someone sitting alone might be sitting there, dreading life."

— Michael Notarnicola, 17, Msgr. Donovan H.S. student

Frustrated by the bullying that followed her from fifth grade to high school, Jodee Blanco began cutting herself, using razor blades and knives to gouge her flesh. At 15, she stuffed a butcher knife into her book bag one morning before heading for her suburban Chicago high school.

"I decided I was going to cut out the hearts of everyone

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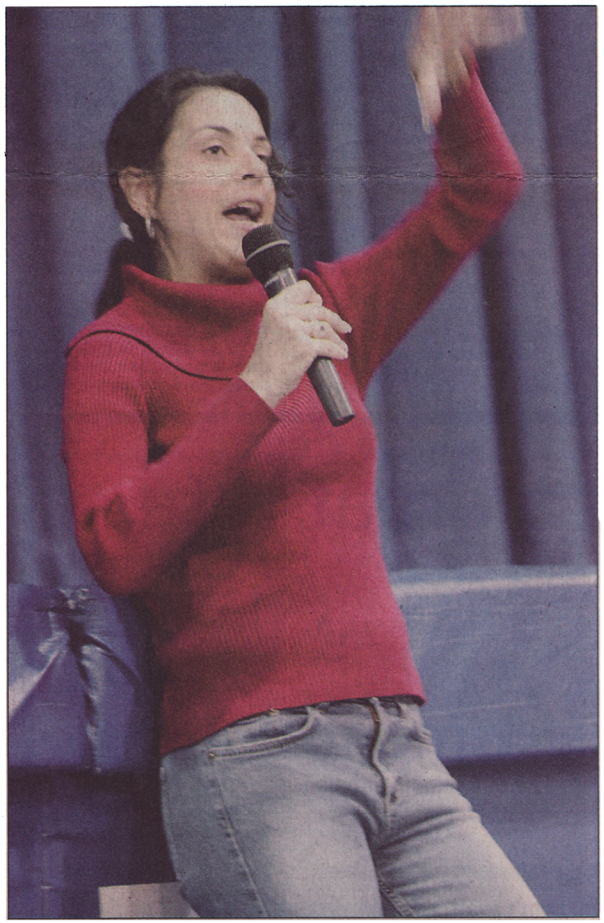

Author Jodee Blanco speaks to students at Monsignor Donovan High School on Wednesday about being bullied as a junior high school and high school student. She also met with teachers after school and then spoke to parents at an evening session.
(STAFF PHOTO: ADENA STEVENS)

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Bullies

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who was tormenting me," Blanco, now 41, told a group of students Wednesday who listened to her anti-bullying program at Monsignor Donovan High School.

"You don't really realize things like that are going on," said senior Michael Notarnicola, 17, of Wall, at the end of Blanco's presentation. Blanco's mother noticed the knife in her book bag that morning more than 25 years ago, and sent her to the hospital, where she was forced to see a therapist. Therapy did not really help, but Blanco credits her mother's sharp eyes for keeping her from hurting the peers who had been tormenting her for years.

"Bullying isn't just the mean things you do; it's the nice things you don't do," said Blanco, who was a successful Hollywood publicist when she decided to write a book about her childhood experiences more than three years ago. "Excluding someone on purpose is bullying. Posting nasty stuff on a blog about someone is bullying. It's the nice things you don't do on purpose because you're afraid."

The book, "Please Stop Laughing at Me," became a New York Times best-seller, and the reaction she received from kids who identified with her story led her to change careers. Blanco is now an anti-bullying activist who presents her program, "It's Not Just Joking Around," at schools throughout the country.

The abuse she received followed Blanco into adulthood. "Despite how successful I am, I stand before you damaged goods," she said. "I am damaged because of what those kids did to me."

Blanco's story has a happy ending. More than three years ago, she attended her 20th high school reunion and spoke to many of the peers who had tormented her for years. They apologized for their actions, and the woman who had been her chief abuser told her that she had always thought Blanco was "so cool, that we wanted to be you."

"Hearing people in the auditorium just laughing and snickering, I felt they were the bullies themselves."

— Senior Lauren Masterson, Barnegat

At a party after the reunion, Blanco danced with a high school crush who, a year ago, became her husband.

Blanco spoke to two groups of Monsignor Donovan students Wednesday, met with teachers after school and then spoke to parents at an evening session. Her presentation seemed to resonate with many of the students who listened to her tale of physical and emotional abuse.

She encouraged the students to stick up for their peers if they notice bullies picking on them, and to approach those kids who may be excluded and left out, if only to say hello.

Amanda Holst, 17, who is also a senior, said she thought Blanco was "wonderful."

"It really makes you think about all of the people you see every day," said Holst, of Manchester. "I can see kids in my classes who I will make an effort to talk to now."

During the presentation, some of the students snickered or made jokes as Blanco described her ordeal. She noticed, and said she believed the kids were reacting that way because her presentation had struck a nerve and they did not know how to react.

Senior Lauren Masterson, 17, noticed some of her peers joking during the morning session, and stood up to say their laughter had disturbed her.

"Hearing people in the auditorium just laughing and snickering, I felt they were the bullies themselves," said Masterson, a Barnegat resident who said she was bullied both physically and psychologically while attending the Russell O. Brackman Middle School there. "I was bullied. They just don't believe that what they're doing is real."

Masterson, who said she wanted to attend Monsignor Donovan to get away from the bullying that had plagued her, said she is more confident now and more involved in school. She said many kids came up to her and praised her for speaking up Wednesday.

"A lot of people came up to me and gave me hugs," she said. "I feel like I gained a lot of people's respect."