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Bullying survivor visits archdiocesan schools with a message to be kinder and gentler humans to each other

Steve Sears, Correspondent **November 21, 2023**

When you hear bullying survivor Jodee Blanco, microphone in hand, speaking her message, sometimes you will hear her voice cracking. It is the pain, the damage of the past, surfacing.

But then there is the force of her voice, the story, and hope in her eyes. You could be one in an auditorium of 1,000 people, and you feel as if she is looking and speaking just to you.

It is part of Blanco's "It's NOT Just Joking Around" anti-bullying school curriculum and seminar, where she continues to heal her damaged self so many years after being tormented from fifth grade through high school, while at the same time sending a specific message to both bullies and victims: Forgiveness and love.

Blanco, who during her school years endured the destruction of her personal property, hate messages, physical intimidation, and ostracism, recently visited various Archdiocese of Newark schools telling her story in early November. She will do so again when she returns to the area Nov. 27 –29.

Blanco's presentation gave bullied students a voice, said Academy of the Holy Angels School in Demarest Principal, Jean Miller. of Blanco visited the school on Oct. 31.

"Students who suffer from unhealthy friendships and who are bullied left school that day feeling supported and feeling that there is definitely hope and a bright future for them," Miller said. "I appreciated Jodee's message that being ignored is just as painful as being aggressively bullied. She reminded us to be kinder and gentler humans to each other."

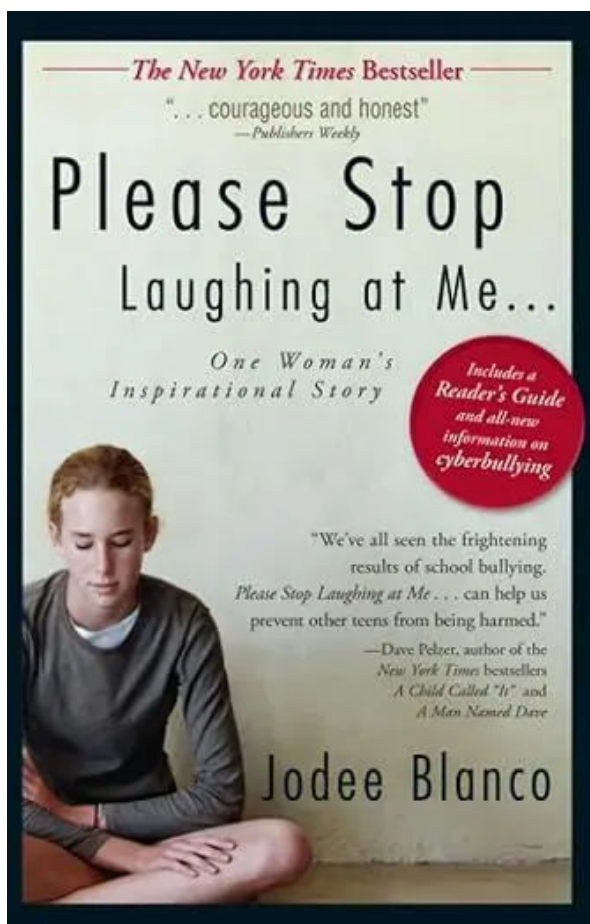
Blanco may be the first voice of the anti-bullying movement. "I was the first adult to ever look back on those experiences through an adult lens and try to make sense of that," she said.

Blanco's "lens" is her authoring of the 2003 book, "Please Stop Laughing at Me: One Woman's Inspirational Story," perhaps the initial school bullying-specific memoir ever written.

Blanco recalled, "Nobody wanted to publish the book. All the publishers said, 'Bullying is a nonissue. There is no audience for this book.' I persevered, and a publisher in Boston was willing to take a chance on me, and it was a runaway New York Times best-seller."

Delivering her anti-bullying message was so important to Blanco that she gave up a successful public relations career for the entertainment and publishing industries and addressed the pleas of those in pain.

"My 'INJJA,' the 'It's NOT Just Joking Around!' program, that was its genesis. I never sat down and wrote out my program or wrote out my talks, ever," she said. "It evolved more like *The Iliad* and *the Odyssey* in that I got up on a stage and I started sharing my story in gyms, auditoriums, and schools. Over time, it evolved into something more structured, and now the program is extremely structured, and I have done it in hundreds and hundreds of schools."





Academy of the Holy Angels Principal, Jean Miller (l) with bullying survivor, Jodee Blanco.



Blanco, who is Catholic and attended Catholic schools for a large part of her school years, has delivered her message in public schools, but her message of compassion and forgiveness resonates especially in Catholic schools. “It’s just a good fit,” she said.



The 60-year-old Blanco also visited Cedar Grove’s St. Catherine of Siena School.



Colleen McElroy, who is in her second year as principal, said Blanco spent the day at the school doing three separate presentations.

“Everyone from grades K to eight, our students heard her speak, and then, after school, we did a professional development with our teachers, where she spoke to our teachers and gave them strategies to implement, and at night she did a presentation for our parents,” McElroy said. “I really wanted to make this comprehensive so that our entire community would be on board.”

Blanco’s presentations at St. Catherine of Siena paid dividends. “Parents were telling me that a lot of kids went home and were talking about the presentation,” McElroy said. “To me, that is successful, that they are going home, and they are telling their parents about what happened. Jodi also gives out supplemental materials. One of my teachers who helps with discipline and I are already meeting to come up with some new practices and policies.”

A St. Catherine of Siena student said she “gained strength through Blanco’s valuable words.” Hearing about Blanco’s high school days and what she went through, inspired her, the student said.

“I’ve been trying to talk to people I usually don’t talk to, and I’ve been trying to be a better person,” she said.

In addition to her powerful message, Blanco also has a receptive ear and is willing to listen to those who approach her after her talk.

“Some of them are kids who are being bullied or excluded, or were bullied or excluded in their previous schools, and want to share their stories,” Blanco said. “Oftentimes, it is also kids who

never realized that their behavior was bullying or unkind, who may be – and my term for the unkind popular kid is the ‘elite tormentor’ – and not even realize it.”



Jodee speaks with students after her talk at Visitation Academy in Paramus. (Visitation Academy)

An Academy of the Holy Angels student said Blanco’s message was from the heart.

“I knew that she meant what she said. What she went through was so sad to hear, but it was empowering for self-advocacy,” the student said. “I was almost heartbroken from listening to her presentation. Additionally, I have always felt afraid of being judged. It is hurtful what they did to her. She did nothing wrong. The way I see it, (the bullies) should have put themselves in her shoes and realized how they would feel about that happening to them.”



Another AHA student added, “Bullying is not just about physical or mental abuse and violence; it’s about how that abuse and violence can leave a deep scar in your soul that may never be washed away.”

Blanco stated that there is both hope and help for all, and an ultimate spiritual culmination that is important.

“What I tell students, parents, and teachers is that bullying is rarely if ever personal, and that the bully is never a bad child, Blanco said. “It is a child in pain, acting out in a cry for help, and that we need to address these cries with compassionate restorative forms of discipline that allow the bully to access their empathy and develop it like a muscle. That allows the targets of those bullies to experience the joy of true forgiveness and reconciliation.”

For more information about Jodee Blanco, visit her website at www.jodeeblanco.com.

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