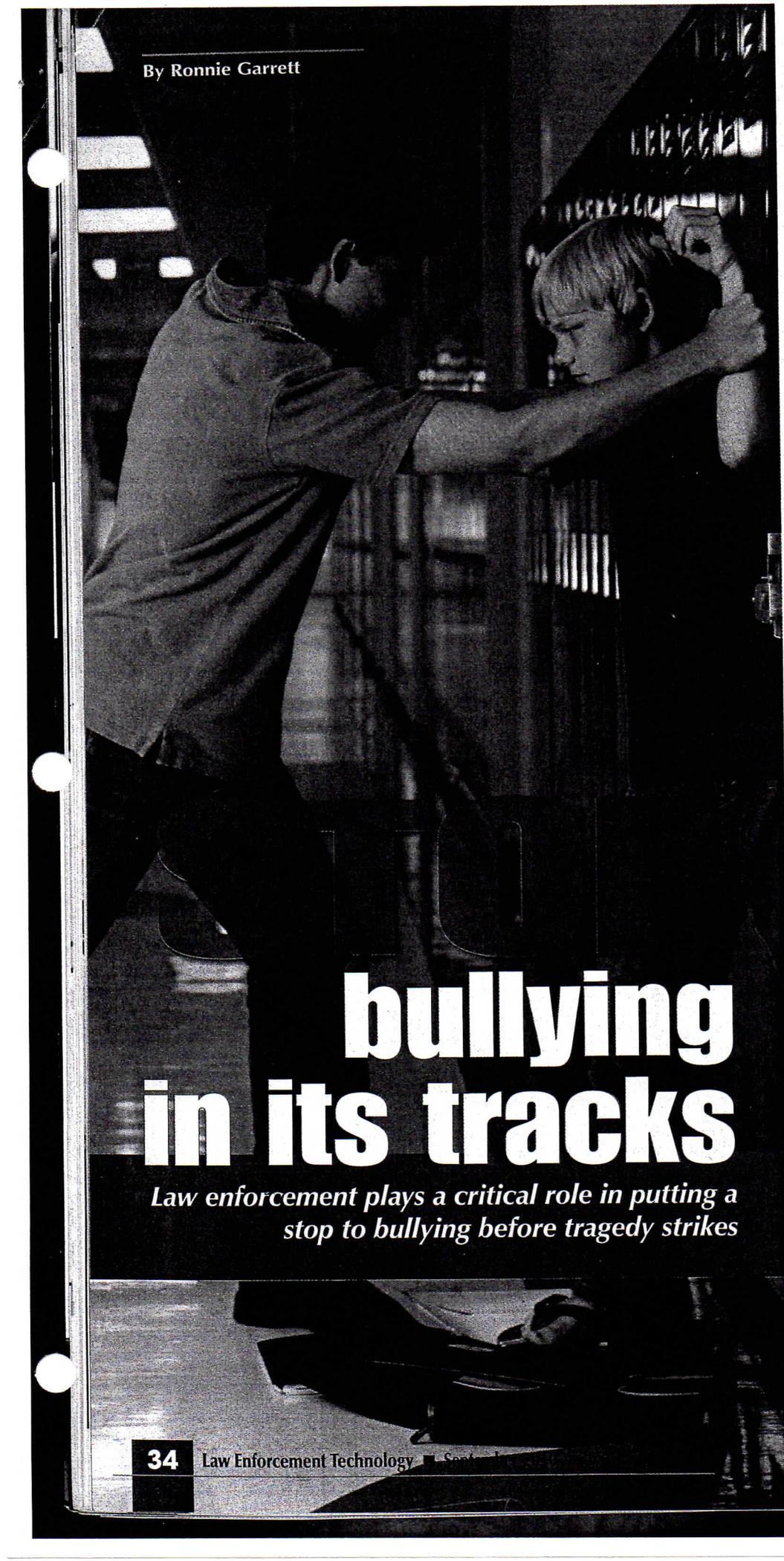


By Ronnie Garrett



bullying in its tracks

Law enforcement plays a critical role in putting a stop to bullying before tragedy strikes

On January 14, the suicide of Phoebe Prince shocked the nation's conscience about bullying.

Prince took her life after a tortuous school day in which she was subjected to verbal harassment and threatened physical abuse. The tragedy marked the culmination of months of abuse, which began when the 15-year-old Irish immigrant started school at South Hadley, Mass., High School in September 2009. Since her death police have charged nine kids for their actions toward Prince and Massachusetts lawmakers have passed anti-bullying legislation, joining 39 states already with these laws.

This is the face of bullying today.

As more schools and communities adopt anti-bullying policies, bullying becomes a problem where law enforcement will increasingly be called upon to intervene, adds Jodee Blanco, bullying survivor turned activist who speaks in schools nationwide through her day-long program "It's NOT Just Joking Around!"

"If it's a zero-tolerance school, principals will call law enforcement, who may be very ill-equipped to deal with it," she says, noting these cases must be investigated and handled differently. "You need to look at bullying as a human being first then as a law enforcement officer," she explains.

Bullying: Then and now

Prince's suicide shed light on a very real problem across the United States. The Youth Voice Project, spearheaded by Stan Davis of Stop Bullying Now and Charisse Nixon, surveyed more than 2,600 students to learn the extent of bullying among young people. The

study released in March found 22 percent of the students surveyed reported being regularly victimized, defined as two or more times a month. Of those affected students, the study found 11 percent reported being severely affected by the abuse, experiencing problems eating, sleeping or enjoying themselves; and 7 percent felt unsafe or threatened because of the victimization.

When you take those numbers and extrapolate them to 50 million school children nationwide, this translates to approximately 6 million bullied kids, according to Davis. "While not every kid who is mistreated will do something dramatic, there are certainly many kids who have a diminished quality of life because of it," he says.

However, Barbara Coloroso, author of "The Bully, the Bullied and the Bystander" and founder of Kids Are Worth It, stresses there are also those kids who may drop out of school, harm or even kill themselves. "And there are a small number of kids, who when repeatedly targeted, will turn the other page into contempt for themselves and everyone else, and they become our school shooters," she says. "We

ignore this at all of our peril."

Ironically in the past, people often dismissed bullying with statements like "kids will be kids" or "it's all part of growing up." Bullying is a real part of growing up, adds Blanco, who points out, "Cruelty is currency to the young. They use it to leverage social status. But it

... 22 percent of the students surveyed reported being regularly victimized, defined as two or more times a month.

— Youth Voice Project survey

shouldn't be a part of growing up, and it doesn't have to be."

But cruelty today packs a far greater punch than it did in the past. Thirty years ago, while bullied students could not escape their feelings of loneliness and rejection, they could escape the abuse within their own homes. Today a nasty rumor can be e-mailed or texted to every single kid in school, posted

on a Facebook wall, or made into a video and posted on YouTube. And once they are out there, these negative messages have some staying power. Two years ago, a group of students in Washington made a video called "Six Ways to Kill Piper and Other Stuff" and posted it on YouTube. While YouTube has since pulled the video, it remains readily available elsewhere on the Internet.

"Today bullied kids cannot escape their tormentors," says Blanco. "If they turn on their computer, it's there. If they turn on their cell phone, it's there. And that's why you're seeing more bullying-related suicides today than you did years ago."

What constitutes bullying?

The first thing law enforcement needs is a clear definition of what bullying is, which can be easier said than done — the definitions for bullying are many. Webster's Dictionary defines bullying as treating someone abusively or affecting that person by means of force or coercion. Some school systems and state laws add these actions must be continuous and repeated over time. Others say the bully must have intended to do harm.

Bullying awareness resources

Training can help police officers spot and address bullying among today's youth. The following are some places to turn for instruction:

Jodee Blanco has conducted bullying awareness training programs for thousands of school officials, law enforcement, district attorneys and judges across the world. She also shares her story in schools across the country. To arrange training or to have Blanco speak at your schools, simply contact her via her Web site at www.jodeeblanco.com or call 708-873-9225.

Barbara Coloroso was a consultant on the Phoebe Prince case in South Hadley, Mass. Her Web site at www.kidsareworthit.com offers a wealth of information on bullying. Bullying awareness training programs can be arranged by contacting her at info@kidsareworthit.com or by calling 800-729-1538.

Stan Davis operates a Web site called www.stopbullyingnow.com, which provides information on bullying. Additional information on bullying can be found at www.youthvoiceproject.com, which is a site operated through a partnership between Stan Davis and Charisse Nixon. To arrange bullying awareness training, contact Davis at stan@stopbullyingnow.com.

Coloroso says she prefers her definition, which defines bullying as “a conscious, willful, deliberate, hostile activity intended to harm where you often get pleasure from someone else’s pain.” The definition adds that bullying takes three forms: verbal, physical or relational, and may have as its overlay religion, race, gender, physical or mental ability or economic status.

Blanco further reminds law enforcement that bullying is not just an overt act of cruelty but also the deliberate omission of compassion, such as exclusion.

Davis adds he’d rather forego the term bullying. As he sees it, there is the larger category of peer mistreatment, which includes legally defined harassment. These are all behaviors

a reasonable person would think would cause an individual to feel unsafe. “Mean behavior is likely to do harm, whether or not that harm was intended and whether or not we know for sure that harm actually happened,” he says. “We know very well which actions by kids are likely to cause harm: name calling about personal characteristics, name calling about race, threats of violence, excluding someone from participating or stopping them from having friends, and spreading rumors. If you know which behaviors are likely to cause harm, you can do something about them.”

Building relationships

Bullying prevention also requires law enforcement to hone its presence

in the school system. “Law enforcement needs to develop relationships at a human level with school administrators, teachers and students,” Blanco explains.

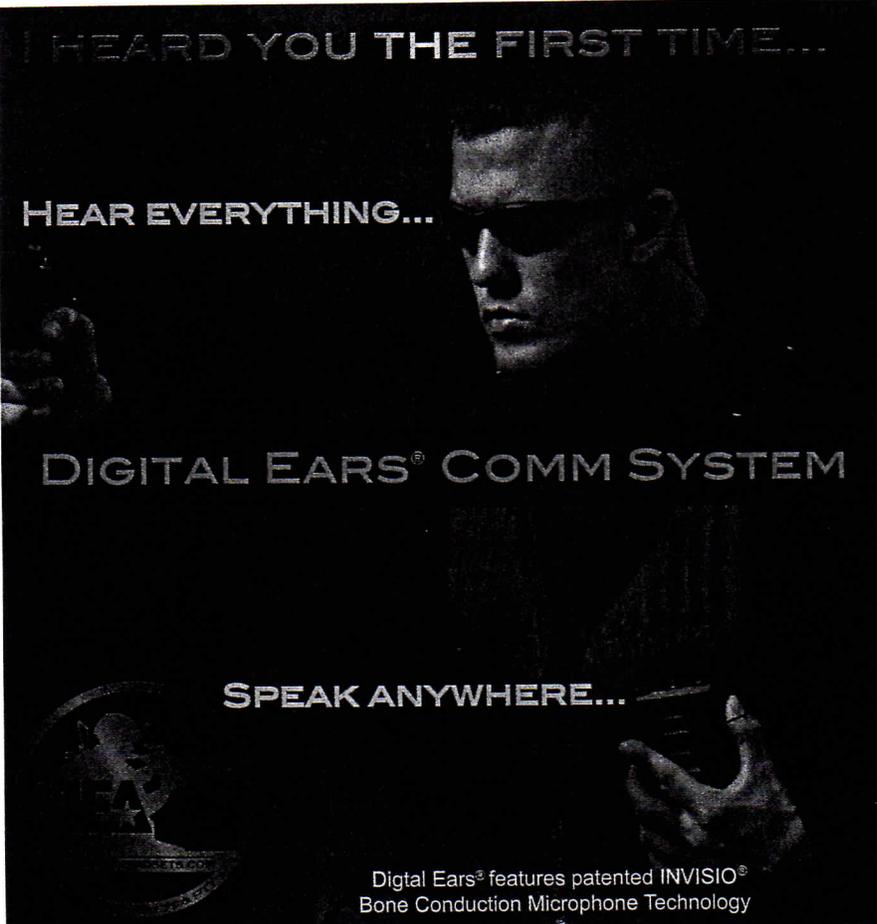
A school resource officer (SRO) can play a tremendous role in developing student connections. “They are out there in the halls, building connections with kids who are very hard to reach,” says Davis, who says these relationships can promote the following among students:

- When other kids see a valued adult having a positive connection with a student, they tend to think more of that student and see him or her as having more value.

- A mistreated kid with an adult connection is more likely to reach out for help. “If they don’t have any-

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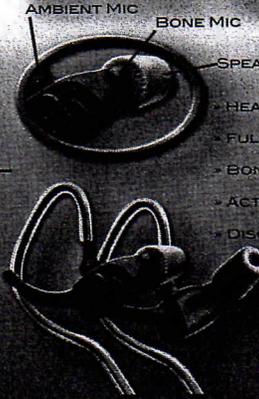


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one, they might keep the harassment to themselves,” Davis says. Blanco adds, “Kids need to see policemen as allies and friends they feel comfortable reaching out to during a crisis. The only way this is going to happen is if the local police department reaches out to schools and starts a dialogue with students and faculty.”

■ If a valued adult tells a bully he or she needs to stop the behavior and offers to help him change it, the child may be more likely to stop. “They listen because of that connection, whereas if someone with no connection to them at all tells them to stop, they may not,” Davis says.

■ Kids who are potential bystanders are more likely to reach out to mistreated kids if they see valued adults being friendly with them.

■ Bystanders are more likely to report mistreatment. There are three characters at play in a bullying tragedy: the bully, the bullied and the bystander, says Coloroso. Often

“You need to look at bullying as a human being first then as a law enforcement officer.”

— Jodee Blanco, author of *“Please Stop Laughing At Me...”*

when bystanders turn a blind eye to what was happening, it is because they are afraid to step in. “Police officers run into somebody who is

afraid to speak up; afraid to tell what they saw,” she explains. But those same individuals may be willing to speak up if they feel they have the protection of a valued adult.

Building relationships with school personnel also puts everyone on the same page when an incident occurs, adds Blanco. She recalls how a New Jersey principal brought in the local police chief to address homerooms and meet with faculty. Later, when a bullying incident occurred and police were called in, all entities were able to have a civilized and productive meeting of the minds because they already had established relationships. “It wasn’t intimidating to have an officer present because there was that human connection,” Blanco says.

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When the call comes in

When police are summoned to intervene in a bullying situation, several steps must be taken. "One, they have to keep the target safe. Two, they need to keep any witnesses safe. Three, they need to deal effectively with the bully," Coloroso says. "And in that order — even if it means some delayed justice."

If the mistreatment is physical, obviously justice must occur immediately. However, if it's relational, the best approach is to catch the bully in the act. **Gather the evidence first, then take action**, says Coloroso. "Why do it that way?" she asks. "Because if you would run immediately to the bully, the victim is at greater risk for harm when you are not around. **Bullying happens under the radar.**"

Asking the right questions on scene helps officers get to the heart of a complicated situation.

With the victim, an officer might ask, "Do you have any friends? How do you spend time after school?" These questions help officers ascertain whether or not the victim is a constant target.

Coloroso warns **officers not to minimize, rationalize or try to explain the bullying away**. To comfort the bullied child and help him or her feel protected, "You need to say to the target, 'I hear you and I'm here for you. I believe you and you are not alone,'" she says.

She also recommends officers stress the harassment was not their fault. "A kid may be weird, dorky or odd, but that doesn't justify bullying," she says. "These kids need to hear that."

On the flip side, officers need to look bullies in the eye and say, "It seems to me you are a good kid,



what's going on? What is making you so angry? Talk to me," says Blanco, who stresses bullies must be approached with both curiosity and compassion. "I've seen so many police officers interview bullies and their victims in an attempt to investigate something and my biggest disappointment is their questions are rote and standard," Blanco says. She adds that officers must remember they are dealing with kids. "The more curious you are about what really happened, the more truth you're going to get," Blanco says.

Blanco cautions law enforcement to also be aware of what she calls the "elite tormenters," the mean members of the cool crowd, who often have as big a hold over the adults in the school as they do over other students. "The elite leaders" in the school, meanwhile, are the caring members of the cool crowd. These students can be law enforcement and school administration's greatest ally in shifting the social dynamic at school. This is what occurred in the Phoebe Prince case, where a group of popular kids targeted Phoebe for months. A group of popular and kind teen leaders tried to help, but without adult intervention and support were unable to do so.

Consequences and teaching moments

When bullying rises to a criminal level, Coloroso reminds police they

cannot be timid about stepping in. "You can't worry about stepping on toes or interfering with the school, you need to take action," she says. "This requires law enforcement to get up to date on the tools they can use and the legal ramifications that exist. There are laws against this behavior."

Define the steps you'll take well in advance of a criminal situation, Coloroso advises. Work with the district to determine what punishments occur at various levels along the bullying triad and make sure these punishments are consistently meted out. Bullying generally doesn't begin at a physical level, stresses Coloroso, who notes it is typically third in the bullying triad. "There is verbal bullying first, then relational (the shunning, gossiping and exclusion), and finally physical," she says. "If you have a child who is physically bullied, I guarantee they were verbally or relationally bullied first."

"No one can say for certain that had someone stopped Phoebe Prince's tormenters in September, she would not have committed suicide," Coloroso says. "But we can say for certain, that had we done so, the last four months of her life would not have been a living hell, and the kids who did it would not be facing criminal charges."

Proactively dealing with bullying sends a powerful message. Coloroso explains: "It says this behavior is not going to be tolerated. It stops bullying in its tracks before it leads to tragedy." ■

Ronnie Garrett is the former editorial director of the Cygnus Law Enforcement Group. She may be reached through her Web site at www.garrettncostudios.com.