

Rosetown Eagle Feb 14th 2011

Puppeteer spreads message against bullies

Eagle staff~ Ian MacKay

Puppets showed school students in Harris how to stand up for themselves recently.

Ventriloquist Val Hilliker and her cast of hand puppets covered teasing, intimidation and getting help as part of her anti-bullying presentation.

"What do we do when we're feeling scared and threatened?" Hilliker asked. "Get help or ignore someone to avoid escalating a fight, even if it takes (ignoring) 21 times for the person trying to bug you to get the message."

Harris-Tessier Central School principal Linda Varty said holding the presentation represented an attempt to head off problems rather than address current ones.

"I don't think (bullying) is a problem here," Varty said, but noting that people sometimes don't realize that something they do constitutes bullying.

"We're being pro-active. This is a really nice bunch of kids," she added, indicating that the school can't often afford such presentations but that the local branch of Prairie Centre Credit Union helped sponsor it.

Using puppets with names like Ollie the Opossum and Crocker the Rocker, Hilliker showed students how to use an erect posture and look others in the eye to stand up for themselves, "Speaking your truth, kindly and assertively."

Looking tormentors in the eyes and using assertive body language shows them you will stand up for yourself, she said.

"When you speak in a deserving and respectful way, people listen," Hilliker said, giving as an example, "Stop that. I deserve respect."

Bullies try to pick on someone they perceive as weaker by making fun of their "glasses, hair, good clothes, bad clothes, wrecked clothes" or the vehicles their parents drive, she said. "If you allow others to pick on you, they will."

Tools to combat such unwanted attention include getting help, ignoring them, looking up and leaving, as well as the elements of her "chill skills" - determination, detachment, tolerance, confidence, peacefulness, patience, courage, self-respect and responsibility.

"You need to be assertive for yourself," she said. "It takes a certain amount of courage and love - love for yourself."

Calgary pediatricians say that 90 per cent of their student clients reveal that people bother them and they don't know what to do, she said, suggesting those in such a position tell their parents or teachers.

She explained the difference between tattling and getting help that that entails.

Tattling is getting someone else in trouble, while getting help is getting somebody out of trouble, she said.

Hilliker learned ventriloquism in her youth and returned to it after surgery on her throat for cancer, she said later. Her former husband didn't like her doing ventriloquism and they divorced, she said.

"When God took my throat, in the form of cancer, I said 'I'm going to die a ventriloquist,' and so this is nine years later, and I'm a ventriloquist," she said. "Here I am, talking to kids about standing up for themselves." Cancer had developed in glands that doctors removed, she said. She's taught the assertiveness program for the last six years because, "I wasn't," Hilliker said. "I wasn't standing up for myself, right from the start. I needed to learn.

"I made myself an easy target for people and I'm not going to allow that to happen to others, if I can prevent it, so that's why I do this show." Hilliker, formerly of Calgary but now based near Red Deer, and her crew of two including her second husband, faced two long drives. They were headed to Creighton that night for a presentation the next day, then were returning west to Paradise Hill. She makes her second trip to the Maritimes this year and also performs for a convention of ventriloquists and a Regina teachers convention.

Val Hilliker advises students of Harris Tessier Central School on avoiding bullying and other conflict through Ollie the Opossum, one of her puppets. Eagle photo.

