The real work against bullying

By Joanna Weiss, Globe Columnist | August 22, 2010

WHAT FORMER teenager among us didn't secretly cheer the arrests of the South Hadley Six?

The criminal case against six alleged bullies, now winding through the courts of central Massachusetts, wasn't just a quest for justice in the case of Phoebe Prince, the 15-year-old who hanged herself last winter after months of high school torment. It felt like a victory for victims past and present, a step toward eradicating teenage cruelty.

That's part of the reason it has been so painful to read Emily Bazelon's articles on Slate.com, which question the wisdom of those criminal charges by digging into Phoebe's own past. Bazelon has given us a likely preview of the criminal defense: details about Phoebe's mental health struggles; the territorial battles she waged among hormonal high school girls; a period, years ago, when she acted bullyish herself.

This seems a sad consequence of the prosecution: an ugly public rendering of the victim's private woes. And Phoebe's history is morally — and probably legally — irrelevant. Regardless of her past or some supposed provocation, she was treated unconscionably, the way far too many kids are.

But one thing Bazelon does well is illustrate why throwing the book at mean kids won't solve a larger cultural problem. The details of Phoebe's story are painful and specific, but the backdrop is universal. She experienced the fluid, fickle nature of teen relationships, the casual meanness of girls.

For the most part, kids aren't permanently divided into mean ones

and innocent good ones, notes Rachel Simmons, cofounder of the nonprofit Girls Leadership Institute and the author of “Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls.” When she holds workshops for girls, Simmons starts by telling them that she was both a bully and a victim in her day. She tries to make them understand that mean jokes and cutting comments, even among friends, can be abusive. She tries to counter the ways that cruelty is trivialized in movies and glorified on TV.

That’s a tall order, and an uphill battle. There are plenty of anti-bullying programs floating around the country — including one that was used at South Hadley High in the months before Phoebe’s death — and most of them don’t work. Annie Fox, an author and teen educator from California, says that’s because schools don’t teach ethical skills and haven’t figured out a way to make “respectful” seem cool.

And Izzy Kalman, a school psychologist from Staten Island, questions the whole approach of mandating niceness. He argues that we should be teaching targets of bullying how to deflect, defend, and cope with imperfect relationships.

“We talk about bullies and victims as if they’re scientific diagnoses,” Kalman says. “They are subjective experiences.”

Outsized punishments and public retribution, Kalman says, often wind up turning bullies into martyrs. And Simmons says it’s unrealistic to think that a few kids’ public shaming could deter a nation of would-be bullies.

Teenagers “don’t think about consequences in a way that adults do,” she says. “If making an example out of a teenager would successfully change behavior, we’d have a pretty well-behaved country of adolescents.”

We don’t, of course. And Northeastern District Attorney Elizabeth

Scheibel's case against the South Hadley Six felt cathartic because it felt, at least, like something. While adults largely acted as bystanders during Phoebe's final months, one bold grown-up was advocating a punishment that would sting.

Perhaps, as Scheibel has said, the defendants will turn out to have acted beyond the scope of normal meanness. Their callous behavior just after Phoebe's death, their cruel posts on her Facebook page, could signify a special brand of hardness.

Or, as Kalman suggests, they might have been acting like immature teenagers, using bravado to deflect a sense of blame. We know how they behaved among their fellow kids. We don't know how they feel in their bedrooms, alone.

That's where the real work against bullying has to happen, in South Hadley and everywhere else. When I really think about it, I don't want mean kids to go to jail. I want them to feel shame. I want them to be nice. But those aren't legal issues; they're human ones.

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