Bentley students leading anti-bullying initiatives in Milton, Waltham

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By Megan McKee, Town Correspondent

A Bentley University student who studied abroad in Australia has brought back to Massachusetts an anti-bullying program she helped spearhead on the other side of the world, and both Waltham and Milton are exploring using it at their schools.

"The biggest driver for me bringing it back here was experiencing how powerful our presentation was," said Sarah Benson, a senior marketing major and coordinator at Bentley's Service Learning Center. "This made me realize that this is a really big deal and we need to share this with other schools and with Waltham. I can't think of a better time for it to happen."

At the core of "One Goal, One Community: Moving beyond bullying and empowering for life" is the belief that peers should be leading peers in anti-bullying efforts and that the community needs to work together to understand bullying and its role in it. Members of a community show their commitment to alleviate bullying by signing a pledge. In Australia, more than 10,000 people have already signed.

Benson and the Australian professor with whom she worked at Bond University, Amy Kenworthy, made a presentation to Waltham community members last week, and Bentley professor Greg Hall is leading his cyber-psychology undergraduate students in preparing an anti-bullying seminar for Milton parents on Nov. 9.

Kenworthy, an associate professor of management, is a Bentley alumna and former service-learning coordinator at the school. She incorporates service learning—having students bring classroom learning into the community—into her classes, and said she was prompted to introduce bullying as a topic after two Australian students killed themselves after being bullied, tragically echoing the suicides of Springfield's Carl Walker-Hoover and South Hadley's Phoebe Prince.

"Bullying is everywhere," she said. "We all have the same issues."

The deaths of Walker-Hoover in 2009 and Prince in 2010, both of whom were bullying victims, led to the state's new anti-bullying law that requires comprehensive reporting and investigation of bullying incidents.

Benson, along with other Bond University students, designed the "One Goal, One Community" program earlier this year. College-age students lead the program, which teaches students about different types of bullying, and how to deal with it, whether they are a victim or witness. Getting college students involved is key since high school students can better relate to people only a few years older than themselves, said Benson.

Kenworthy said one of the most vital weapons to combat bullying is communication. She said a US Department of Justice statistic states that 70 percent of bullying victims don't talk about their experiences. By raising awareness among all community members—students, parents, teachers, police, business owners—dialogue becomes easier, she said.

"The major thrust for this initiative, both for Bond and Bentley, is to stimulate communication among people and among students, community members, business members," said Kenworthy.

Milton superintendent Mary Gormley said the resources provided by Bentley have been more extensive than the numerous other presenters and consultants the school system has had. She said Hall has already given a presentation to teachers, and she's thrilled to continue working with Bentley

"The content was unbelievable," she said. The teachers "were really taken aback by the level of the presentation."

In Waltham, interim school chief Anne Marie Carr-Reardon said the School Department will work with Bentley as the city implements anti-bullying initiatives by the end of the year to comply with the state's new anti-bullying law.

Hall said the Milton parent-targeted program will be led by his students.

"They'll research it, design it, and deliver the program. By the time November comes, they'll have a level of expertise beyond the bullying," he said. He said his presentation will act as a precursor to the "One Goal, One Community" program.

The program in Waltham will be led by students from Bentley's Service Learning

Center.

Kenworthy has been visiting from Australia to get the program launched at Bentley, but when she returns to Australia next week, she said she will continue to guide her students in expanding the program. This year, 10 more school districts in Australia are participating.

Both Kenworthy and Hall said they hope to make the programs easy to replicate and institute so as many districts that want to participate can participate.

“Through service learning, we’re creating a program where university students are these incredibly effective agents of change,” said Kenworthy.

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