

It Has to Stop, ex-Hab Tells Students

Chris Nilan talks frankly to children about how they can help victims, tell the bully to leave them alone, then 'go tell your teacher'.

By BRENDA BRANSWELL, The Gazette February 11, 2012



Edward Murphy School students listened raptly as former Canadiens enforcer Chris Nilan told them everyone has to help end bullying. "Some kids think it's cool to be a bully. It's not. It's cruel," Nilan told the kids.

Photograph by: PIERRE OBENDRAUF THE GAZETTE

Chris Nilan retired from professional hockey long before any of the children sitting cross-legged in front of him at Edward Murphy School on Friday were born.

But the 54-year-old old former Montreal Canadiens enforcer wasn't at the east-end elementary school to talk about hockey.

He was there to talk about something "so much more important than hockey" - the global problem of bullying.

"Some kids think it's cool to be a bully. It's not. It's cruel," Nilan told the students in the gymnasium.

Nilan talked about the different kinds of bullying - such as verbal, physical and

cyber-bullying - and the roles people play when it's unfolding.

"We don't want to be a bystander. We want to be someone who helps the victim. We want to be what they call a defender."

Nilan offered tips about how to defend someone who is being bullied. You don't do it by hitting someone and you don't have to yell and scream. "Stop! Leave him alone, or leave her alone - that's all you have to say," Nilan said. "Then go tell your teacher what happened."

"Now a lot of kids say to me, 'Well, Oh, I don't want to do that because everybody will think I'm a tattletale.'"

"But you're not a tattletale. What you're doing is helping someone, you're helping the poor victim who is usually, constantly bullied. Sometimes there are certain kids that kids pick on all the time."

Nilan has been taking his anti-bullying message to Montreal schools. Asked what prompted him to do so, Nilan first mentioned his father and his upbringing.

When he was a child, his father warned him that if he was involved in picking on other kids at school, that he'd have to deal with him, Nilan said.

A disciplined, military man, his father expected his children to be a certain way and, if anything, to stick up for other kids, Nilan said.

"I'm proud to say I did that as a kid. I wasn't a bully. I was someone who defended other kids and it was just the way I played hockey too," Nilan said in an interview after his talk.

Another reason he got involved with anti-bullying was Phoebe Prince, an Irish teenager living in Massachusetts who committed suicide in 2010 after being bullied by classmates.

"That was the first one that really got to me," Nilan said.

And then there were the suicides of Jamie Hubley, an openly gay 15-year-old from Kanata, who had battled depression and who had also been bullied, and most recently Marjorie Raymond, a 15-year-old from the Gaspé, who had been bullied for three years.

"To me that's totally unacceptable. It's a shame."

Nilan holds the Canadiens record for most penalty minutes. He says there's no contradiction "whatsoever" between his former enforcer role in hockey and his antibullying message.

"What I did in hockey was basically stick up for my teammates. What is done on the ice and in hockey is a totally different environment than going to school." Children are supposed to be able to grow and learn in a safe environment, he said.

Edward Murphy School takes part in a joint community program with Montreal police that promotes non-violence. Some Grade 5 students receive training for a peer mediator role. They patrol the schoolyard and encourage students to play nicely.

"I thought his speech was very clear and it made us all learn a lot," said Grade 6 student Milena Bentravato, who was part of the schoolyard patrol last year.

Nilan said he finds speaking to students about bullying rewarding. "I feel passionate about it."

"Chris Nilan is not the answer," he said, adding it will come from every single child in school and from parents, educators and police. "It's got to come from everywhere."

Bullying has to stop, he said. "When it gets as far as it's gotten in a lot of cases, we're not doing the right thing for these kids."