

STRETCH (Students Ready To Make Change): Making a Difference in the Lives of Students

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Abstract

Described in this multifaceted article are various types of bullying and the potential long-term, harmful effects. The authors also depict a multitude of strategies for parents / guardians and teachers in assisting children who have suffered from bullying. Furthermore, the authors share their personal experiences with bullying and explain the reasons they are extremely passionate and dedicated in doing whatever is in their power to end bullying. Finally, a university student organization named STRETCH (Students Ready To Make Change) is introduced. Members of STRETCH create multi-media presentations to assist students in understanding the harms of bullying and the benefits of performing acts of kindness for all individuals. STRETCH members perform these entertaining presentations which consist of videos, personal stories, music, and educational activities to K-12 students in an effort to make a difference in their lives and letting them know they are not alone.

STRETCH (Students Ready To Make Change): Making a Difference in the Lives of Students

Failure to Protect

As a mother and educator I have an instinctive drive to nurture, educate, and provide safety to my sons and students. One can only imagine the devastation and extreme sense of failure I feel when I recall those dark years of my youngest son's elementary experience. *Failure to protect* - these are the words that plague me as I think about those years and how my son was ostracized and shunned by his peers. The thought that perhaps I failed to protect him saddens me immensely and outrage engulfs me as I undeniably know the school system failed him, as well as many other children in today's society.

It all began when I accepted a job as an assistant professor at a prestigious university in the Midwest. My family, including my two sons and husband, were excited as we anticipated and prepared for this new life changing adventure. We moved from our large Texas city to a relatively small town. At the time, my older son was preparing to begin the fifth grade, while my younger son was starting the third grade. As one can imagine,

moving half way across the country was stressful and my work as an assistant professor took every minute of my time. I was so driven to do well and to make a name for myself that much of my attention was focused on my new career. It was not until about six weeks into the school year that I realized what was happening. I often ask myself how I could have been so oblivious to my son's grief. To this question I can only answer that he hid his pain very well, as many children who are bullied manage to do.

Late one night I passed by my youngest son's bedroom and heard him crying. I knocked on the door and walked in to find him lying on the floor sobbing. I immediately went to him and asked him what was wrong. At first he would not tell me, but then eventually he began to divulge the source of his immense sadness. He began to describe episode after episode of how the children in his class unmercifully ridiculed him and excluded him on a daily basis. He explained that no one would sit with him at lunch and that when he tried to begin conversations with students, they would laugh and walk away from him. He expressed how the students called him every name in the book and made him feel worthless. I could now see so clearly that the once fun loving, outgoing, confident child I thought I knew so well, had become insecure, beaten down, and frightened.

I had nine years' experience of teaching students with emotional and behavioral disorders and eleven years as a parent, so I knew many strategies for how to calm a child. However, the strategies I attempted were not working, and he became more and more distraught. As the first hour of our conversation turned into the second, I became desperate. I finally told him that he did not have to attend school the following day and that I would make an appointment to meet with his teacher. He eventually stopped crying and fell asleep. I, on the other hand, did not rest at all that night. Memories of my own elementary years flooded back to me. I had been horribly bullied in fifth grade, and the descriptions of bullying my son shared with me that night rang all too well a familiar bell. I sat at the kitchen table despising myself for letting this happen to him and making a plan for how to end this bullying.

The next day I scheduled an appointment to meet with his teacher. I remember walking into the classroom filled with hope and confidence that she would assist me in resolving this issue. I recall thinking that perhaps this had all just be an enormous misunderstanding and that possibly the situation was not as dire as I had believed the night before. As I described to her the events of the previous evening, the expressions, and comments of the teacher did not instill confidence in me, but increased dread. She stated that she understood my son wanting to remain at home and she herself had experienced bullying as a child and stayed home many days from school to escape her tormenters. She further confirmed that everything my son had said was true and she was concerned about the bullying in her class. When I asked her what her ideas were concerning putting an end to the bullying, she was at a loss. I began to make suggestions but quickly realized my ideas were as unwelcome as my presence. I left the school feeling utterly defeated and alone.

That first year was definitely the most difficult. During the following years there were slight improvements; however, true peace did not actually come until we decided to move out of the district so my son could attend a different school. During those years I truly felt

trapped. We had contemplated several other alternatives including moving to a different district, private schooling, and even home schooling. Our financial situation prohibited us from moving to a different district any sooner than we did. I looked into private schools, but the tuition was extremely expensive and not financially feasible. I did contemplate home school; however, I was working at least sixty hours a week and I knew in my heart that was not the right choice for us. We even seriously considered moving back to Texas. However, we had made a new life. We had no jobs or home in Texas anymore. This was now our new home and I felt like we had to try and make things work.

My youngest son is now a junior in high school. Even though several years have passed, he still talks about the reoccurring, relentless episodes of bullying he endured throughout those years in elementary school. I know being bullied has changed him. As a professor, I often times ask my students, who are preparing to become educators, to imagine being bullied every day of their lives. I ask them to envision reoccurring episodes of being pushed, tripped, ridiculed, spit upon, and made to feel like the punch line of every joke. I then inquire how long they think it may be before they actually started to believe the horrible, mean comments everyone was saying about them. This aspect of bullying is one of the most damaging. Frequently when we are the recipients of repeated abuse, we begin to see ourselves as others describe us and treat us.

I instruct my teacher candidates to have a zero tolerance for bullying in their classrooms. I instill in them that they are responsible for the safety and well-being of all of their students. If someone is being bullied in their classrooms, they absolutely must stop it immediately. I wish my fifth grade teacher had been diligent in stopping me from being bullied. I also wish, above anything else, my son's teachers had been able to prevent him from being harassed, ostracized, and made to feel as though he was insignificant and without value. This is why bullying is such a critical issue to me. No parent should ever have to pick their grief-stricken child up from the bedroom floor.

Literature Review

What is Bullying?

Imagine a group of second graders on the playground at recess. They are playing a friendly game of tag when a young boy named David comments to his classmate, Susie that she smells like cheese. She states in a friendly manner, "We just ate pizza for lunch silly. Everyone here smells like cheese." However, this seemingly innocent comment from David quickly escalates into a full blown attack on Susie's appearance and daily hygiene. David says loudly, "No, I don't smell like you! You smell bad and look ugly. I'm not even sure why we are all playing with you." Sally is left speechless and does not know quite how to respond to David's now escalated verbal assault. However, within seconds other children from the playground chime in hurtful comments about Susie and begin to run away from her screaming she has "cooties." The barrage of comments leaves Susie stunned and in tears.

According to Banks, a multitude of actions constitutes bullying:

Bullying is comprised of direct behaviors such as teasing, taunting, threatening, hitting, and stealing that are initiated by one or more students against a victim. In addition to direct attacks, bullying may also be more indirect by causing a student to be socially isolated through intentional exclusion (Banks, 2013, para. 2).

Some individuals may construe David's original comment as somewhat harmless and as a simple example of teasing; however, the situation quickly progresses into a full onslaught of bullying. At times it is difficult for children to distinguish the difference between teasing and bullying. As in this example of David and Susie, what began as teasing quickly escalated. At times the line between teasing and bullying can be almost non-existent, "Teasing becomes bullying when it is repetitive or when there is a conscious intent to hurt another child" (Home of Parent & Child Magazine, 2015, para.1). Students may endure a multitude of different types of bullying, including physical, social, and cyberbullying (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, et al., 2014).

Teachers are frequently at a loss about what they should do to resolve an escalating situation. Unfortunately, some educators think that all children from time to time participate in teasing one another and may not construe verbal comments as truly concerning, until the behaviors become physical in nature (Banks, 2013). However, this misconception by teachers can be extremely detrimental to students who are experiencing bullying. Physical bullying has the potential to be extremely harmful and can result in serious bodily injury. However, according to research, it is the insults that children utter in the hallway and the exclusion on the playground or at lunchtime that can be potentially just as destructive, if not more so (Williams & Nida, 2009).

Physical, verbal, and social bullying may occur outside on the schoolyard or within various places inside school buildings, including cafeterias, hallways, restrooms, and classrooms. However, the increasing epidemic of cyberbullying has now made it possible to be bullied inside the safety of one's own bedroom or while sitting on the couch watching a movie with family. Many students feel almost invincible by the anonymity that a computer grants them. As with all types of bullying, cyberbullying is extremely detrimental. Furthermore, whereas physical, verbal, or social bullying may cease at the end of the school day, cyberbullying leaves its sufferers feeling there are no safe havens. The statistics related to students experiencing bullying are staggering:

While the various studies show different numbers of students who claim to have been the victim of bullying, the general consensus is that about one quarter of students are victimized by bullies at school. Of those children who are victimized, about 77 percent of them are bullied verbally and physically, while about 43 percent have been bullied online (NoBullying.com, 2014, para. 2).

As someone who has personally experienced bullying in countless different ways, I can honestly attest that all forms of bullying result in pain and devastation. Whether the bullying results in bruises or a shattered self-esteem, the damages can be irreparable and have life-long consequences (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001).

Students Affected by Bullying

Student may be affected by bullying at any time throughout their years of schooling. The type of bullying encountered may depend upon if the student is in elementary, middle, or high school:

Direct bullying seems to increase through the elementary years, peak in the middle school/junior high school years, and decline during the high school years. However, while direct physical assault seems to decrease with age, verbal abuse appears to remain constant (Banks, 2013, para. 3).

Some children and teenagers may not ask for assistance to end their bullying nightmares; instead they seek out solutions of their own. Research reveals thousands of students attempt to seek safety at home and escape bullying episodes by refusing to attend school (NoBullying.com, 2014; Batsche & Knoff, 1994). As a child, I employed this strategy on multiple occasions to escape my tormentors. During my own childhood, when the repeated bullying became intolerable for me, I would feign an illness. To this day, almost thirty years after the fact, I remember how very difficult it was for me to tell my parents what was happening to me at school. I was embarrassed and feared my parents would see me as my bullies did, weak and unworthy. I hated deceiving my parents, but pretending to fall down a flight of stairs and hurt my wrist or telling them I had been awake all night with a stomach virus was much easier for me than explaining I had been spit upon, kicked, punched, and constantly ridiculed.

Whereas some students refuse to go to school, other sufferers of bullying attempt to arm themselves with weapons or participate in self-harm (NoBullying.com, 2014; Arseneault, Bowes, & Shakoor, 2010). These approaches in particular may possibly have devastating, long-lasting effects for all of those involved. The most tragic and heartbreaking outcome occurs when students who are bullied believe there will never be an end to their pain and contemplate or attempt suicide. Research indicates students affected by bullying, especially cyberbullying, have increased thoughts about and attempts of suicide (van Geel, Vedder, & Tanilon, 2014). Other consequences of bullying may include severe complications to health. Students who are bullied may not be able to sleep at night, as they contemplate the anguish of the following day. They also may lose their appetites and suffer from depression and absolute sadness. The problem may further be compounded by a loss of desire to participate in previously loved activities. Finally, academics may deteriorate as the student loses interest, refuses to attend on a regular basis, or drops out of school (Home of Parent & Child Magazine, 2015; stopbullying.gov., n.d., *Bullying and children and youth with disabilities and special health needs*).

Students who are perceived to be different may be the targets of bullying. This may entail slight differences in hair style, selection of clothing, or the way in which a child speaks. Children who participate in bullying behaviors often pursue others who they believe will not take actions to stop the abusive acts, whether the actions are physical, verbal, or social in nature. Therefore, students with special needs may be the recipients and / or perpetrators of bullying acts:

Children with physical, developmental, intellectual, emotional, and sensory disabilities are more likely to be bullied than their peers. Any number of factors - physical vulnerability, social skill challenges, or intolerant environments - may increase their risk. Research suggests that some children with disabilities may bully others as well. (stopbullying.gov., n.d., Bullying and children and youth with disabilities and special health needs, para. 1).

Whereas all students are susceptible to bullying, some may be especially vulnerable because they have special needs including: learning disabilities, physical or health impairments, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), language and speech difficulties, or autism (Twyman, et.al, 2010; Van Roekel, Scholte, & Didden, 2010; Hamiwka, et. al, 2009; Weiner & Mak, 2009; Hugh-Jones & Smith, 1999).

These students may be singled out as potential targets more so than students without special needs because of physical differences, social awkwardness, or communication (Blake, Lund, Zhou, et al., 2012). It is critical for teachers to ensure that each one of their students is protected and has a safe environment in which to learn and thrive. It is also just as essential that parents are able to detect the warning signs demonstrated by children who are being bullied and to know what they should do if bullying is occurring. Students with special needs who are bullied may need specific assistance in developing skills such as self-assertiveness and problem management (Baladerian, Coleman, & Stream, 2012).

Helpful Information for Parents

Reasons students do not request adult assistance. It can be a heartbreaking experience for parents to come to the realization that someone is harming their child. The anger, sadness, and guilt associated with this situation can be immense. As a parent who has experienced this first-hand, I felt extreme guilt and still struggle with this years later. As I indicated earlier, my son was able to hide the bullying he endured thoroughly from me for several weeks. I, too, was able to conceal my experiences from my parents. The reasons a child may decide not to share the bullying occurrences with their parents or trusted adults are extensive. In fact, according to 2012 statistics derived from *Indicators of School Crime and Safety*, children decided to not reveal their bullying experiences to an adult 60% of the time (stopbullying.gov, n.d., *Warning signs*). As I also explained previously, I did not share my experiences with my parents, because I was very embarrassed. It was excruciating for me to finally admit to them what was happening to me. I was needlessly worried, because their reactions were that of any concerned, loving parent. However, research indicates that children often do not tell their parents or other trusted adults, because they are anxious these individuals will somehow think negatively

of them (stopbullying.gov, n.d., *Warning signs*).

Other possible causes for students who are being bullied to remain silent and not tell a trusted adult involve self-esteem issues, fear of further rejection by peers, and social isolation. Repeated episodes of bullying can strip someone of his or her self-esteem (Zwierzynska, K., Wolke, D., & Lereya, T. S., 2013). It is possible that students remain silent because they wish to regain some of their lost self-esteem by attempting to handle the issue on their own. In their minds, informing adults only solidifies their feelings of incompetence. Students may also decline to reach out to adults for assistance because they are concerned their peers will perceive them as weak, thus making a bad situation even worse. Finally, every bullying situation is different; however, one common factor includes social isolation. Students may believe they are the only ones who are being treated badly, therefore contributing to guilt and social isolation (stopbullying.gov, n.d., *Warning signs*).

Strategies Parents May Utilize to Assist Children Being Bullied

Listening without judgement. When a parent first realizes his or her child is being bullied, it is sometimes difficult to know how to proceed and resolve the dilemma. However, there are many steps parents can take in assisting their children. To begin, it is critical to listen to the child and offer reassurance, support, and love (Home of Parent & Child Magazine, 2015). It is important that parents do not criticize or impose judgements. Parents need to keep in mind that it may be extremely difficult for a child to disclose occurrences of bullying. Therefore, during these interactions, it is paramount for children not to feel as if their parents are blaming them for the situation.

Discussing and role playing situations. Also, it is often beneficial for parents to talk with their children concerning specific situations and assist them in knowing what actions they should take. Sometimes children are at a loss of what to say or do when they encounter embarrassing or uncomfortable situations. It can be beneficial for parents to discuss with their children possible responses to unkind comments or techniques to escape unfavorable situations (Home of Parent & Child Magazine, 2015). When my son was experiencing bullying at school, my husband and I employed this strategy frequently. He would arrive home from school, sometimes in tears, and after much prompting would explain to us what had occurred throughout the day. He would lay bare every harsh comment and unkind act which had been bestowed upon him that day. In turn, my husband and I would role play with him possible alternatives of what he might have said or done differently. For example, if he sat down next to a group of students at lunch and they refused to acknowledge his existence, we discussed possible alternatives, such as possible topics of conversations or finding other children with whom to eat lunch. If the situation repeated itself the following day, he would know other ways to resolve it. This strategy met with good success and was often beneficial to him. He also very much appreciated our efforts in attempting to assist him. He acknowledged these discussions helped him feel as though he was not alone and that we supported him completely.

Communicating with teachers. It is extremely important for parents to discuss the treatment of their children with their teachers (Home of Parent & Child Magazine, 2015; Witmer, 2015). This strategy should be employed immediately upon learning of or suspecting that a child has been bullied. It is important for parents to talk to teachers so that they may express their concerns and relate first-hand accounts from adults' perspectives of the events occurring. As I stated earlier, I immediately called my son's teacher and scheduled an appointment to meet with her that very day. Even though my son's teacher did not provide the type of support I had hoped for; it was beneficial to speak with her about daily events. She was able to be my ears and eyes on a regular basis. She continuously reinforced my son's accounts of bullying episodes and, as time progressed, I think truly did intervene more frequently. My constant communication with my son's teacher also assisted in her understanding that I was extremely involved in my son's life and very concerned. I believe this communication further reinforced her efforts to intercede and assist my son when possible.

Furthermore, it is important for parents to document the dates, times, and contents of all meetings, phone calls, and emails with teachers. This information is critical so that this verification may be presented to school administrators or superintendents, if necessary (Witmer, 2015). Lastly, communicating with school personnel assists in children's understanding that the parent(s) and school are working together to solve the problem, thus creating an atmosphere of unity and mutual concern.

Finding activities to build self-esteem. Research reveals bullying has negative effects on one's self esteem (Home of Parent & Child Magazine, 2015; Banks, 2013; Batsche & Knoff, 1994). Therefore, it is paramount that parents find ways in which to restore their children's self-image. This strategy was one of the most essential my husband and I utilized during the years in which my son was being bullied. My son's self-esteem improved when we began exploring different opportunities and hobbies for him in which he might become involved. Over time, he discovered his great passion and talent for sketching pictures, swimming, writing short stories, and reading. Additionally, I made certain we were doing many activities as a family. We never allowed him to spend too much time alone and always had enjoyable activities planned that we could participate in together. These exciting and fun family activities and his discovery of newly found talents assisted in increasing his self-esteem. Furthermore, my husband and I continuously praised his accomplishments and offered daily accolades. Although at time it felt as if twenty compliments from his family members could be obliterated by one hurtful comment from a peer, we were not deterred and kept making efforts. Finally, we worked diligently on assisting my son in meeting new people and making new friends outside of school. We worked with him on strategies of making and maintaining friendships which proved to be very beneficial.

Seeking support from others. Students who are bullied often believe they are completely alone and no one has ever experienced similar occurrences. Many times reading the accounts of others in similar situations may be helpful. There are numerous on-line support groups for students who have been bullied. Having the opportunity to recount their own stories in conjunction with reading the narratives from others helps children

understand they are certainly not alone in their experiences. However, if this is an option of interest, it is extremely important parents assist their children in locating a support group right for them. It is also critical that parents oversee and monitor their children's participation in these support groups to ensure positive experiences. It may also be beneficial to locate in-person support group meetings for those who have been bullied. If there is not an in-person support group available in a nearby location, parents may consider the option of collaborating with others to establish one.

What can Teachers do to Eliminate Bullying?

Establishing rules and consequences. It is critical teachers create a classroom environment that establishes an atmosphere of compassion, tolerance, and consideration for everyone. Clear expectations concerning the manner in which students treat one another should be created and explicitly presented to students both verbally and in written form on the first day of the school year (Gable, Hester, Rock, & Hughes, 2009). Students must know and understand the teachers' expectations, as well as the consequences of bullying. Many elementary, junior high, and high schools, have established school wide anti-bullying rules and consequences. It is critical teachers work collaboratively with administrators in establishing and reinforcing the school's policies against bullying (Migliore, 2003).

Remaining vigilant. Once rules and consequences have been clearly expressed to students, it is paramount teachers continuously monitor students. Sometimes bullying episodes may be overt and occur in classrooms. However, on many occasions bullying happens in places such as restrooms, playgrounds, locker rooms, cafeterias, and hallways. Therefore, teachers should constantly monitor their students and act expeditiously if bullying occurs. When I was a child and experiencing relentless bullying, the episodes transpired in every location of the school. The exclusion, harassment, and physical altercations frequently took place in front of a teacher. At ten years old, I was at a loss as to why my teacher stood by and only intervened in the direst of circumstances. As I explained earlier, I was embarrassed and ashamed I was being bullied. Therefore, I did not seek assistance from my parents or teachers until the bullying became absolutely intolerable. However, any school personnel paying at least a modicum of attention would have realized what was occurring.

STRETCH (Students Ready To Make Change)

Creation of STRETCH. My own past experiences with bullying and the years of bullying my son endured fueled a fire within me to do whatever was in my power to end bullying. My first thought was that I would design and deliver innovative and dynamic presentations for students in the K-12 setting. These presentations would consist of inspirational videos, educational activities, and the sharing of personal stories to assist students in understanding that bullying is destructive and can have long-term effects. I also wanted to send the message to students that if they were being bullied, they were definitely not alone. Many times when I was being bullied I thought I was the only person in the world bearing such pain. However, I quickly realized that K-12 students

would not want to listen to me about such topics, because they would simply view me as another adult telling them what to do. However, I believed that the students at my university would be much more effective in the delivery of these critical messages, because they would perceive college students as mentors, friends, or resemble an older sibling. I shared this idea with my dear friend and colleague and the student organization STRETCH (**S**tudents **R**eady **T**o Make **C**hange) originated during spring 2014.

Interviews of members. Becoming a member in this organization requires an in-depth interview and assessment of skills which are vital to presenting. We are continuously looking for students who attend our university, who display qualities and characteristics such as: being extremely well spoken, charismatic, and not hesitant to perform in front of extremely large venues filled with children and teenagers. Most importantly, STRETCH members must share the same passion and desire to end bullying, so that no student endures feelings of fear, inadequacies, or shame. Interviews are held two times each year to ensure continuous growth of the organization.

Designing and rehearsing presentations. STRETCH members meet weekly to design and rehearse presentations. We create several presentations to perform for different grade levels. Of course it is imperative that members design presentations which are age appropriate and clearly depict our message in an entertaining manner, as to hold the attention of students. Our presentations consist of numerous educational, motivating, and inspirational activities and videos. As stated, students' grade levels determine the types of activities we employ. For younger students, we focus our presentations on teaching the students acts of kindness, explanations of what bullying looks like, and the importance of notifying trusted adults for assistance. For older students, the activities we create focus on maintaining positive self-esteem, understanding healthy ways to resolve conflict, and being a role model for younger children. The videos we utilize invoke emotion to all who view them and reinforce the concepts we introduce.

Scheduling of presentations. As the co-founder and faculty advisor of STRETCH, I contact schools each semester to schedule our complimentary presentations. As presentation dates approach, we arrange rehearsals to ensure we perform the best presentations possible. It is imperative to us that our presentations are engaging, well-rehearsed, and relatable to the age of students to whom we are presenting. We spend two or more hours rehearsing each presentation to ensure cohesiveness and complete student engagement during presentations.

Evolution of STRETCH. This organization has grown tremendously over the past two years. As word of our professionalism and powerful message has spread from school to school, more administrators are inviting us to present to their students. Two years ago, it was necessary for me to actively recruit administrators to allow us to present to their students. However, at this point in time, administrators contact me and ask for us to come to their schools. The administrators hear about STRETCH through their colleagues or through similar measures. This new swing of the pendulum has assisted in making the scheduling of presentations much easier. This is a great feeling and shows the tremendous growth of our organization. During the 2015 - 2016 academic year, STRETCH

performed forty-five completely complimentary presentations for schools in Illinois and California.

Currently, STRETCH has twenty-five active members. When the organization first originated in spring 2014, there were fifteen members. This organization absolutely has a close, family feel to it. We rehearse and present to schools almost weekly, so we spend a tremendous amount of time together. The friendships that our members have forged assist us greatly in our presentations. We like and respect each other tremendously as a group and our kinship and bond are evident to the K-12 grade students to whom we present.

Funding for STRETCH. It has always been the mission of STRETCH to perform our presentations to any school district in our region or surrounding areas absolutely free of charge. We completely furnish all supplies for activities during the presentations and are more than willing to give our time to the design and rehearsal of the presentations. In the beginning, my colleague and co-founder of STRETCH and I financially supported STRETCH. We provided money to purchase supplies for activities which were utilized during the presentations. However, since that time, we have been extremely fortunate to receive two grants which have been exceedingly beneficial. Since fall 2014, STRETCH has received a yearly grant from the Parents' Association. This grant has been instrumental in assisting us in the purchase of t-shirts for the organization, supplies, and travel expenses. During spring 2016, I accompanied four exceptionally talented members of STRETCH to present to schools in Los Angeles, California. Monies received from the Parents' Association and a Special Emphasis Student Travel Grant awarded by our university made this trip of over 3,200 miles round trip possible. Therefore, we were able to perform our presentations in Los Angeles completely free of charge to the K-12 schools with all expenses for travel being funded by our university.

Members of STRETCH. All of the members of STRETCH have experiences with bullying to varying degrees. These past bullying occurrences assist them in relating to the K-12 students who have experienced similar episodes. During presentations, STRETCH members speak from their hearts, and it is evident to everyone listening. In the following section, four members describe in their own words their heart-felt experiences with bullying and the reasons they joined this organization.

STRETCH Members Share Their Experiences with Bullying

James. *Well I was only 17, when I walked in, she had a razor to her wrist cut open. I didn't understand why, I thought her life was just fine. Then I realized, she's been lying. You've been gone in a world so messed up, gone in a world so cold, gone in a world so screwed up, you can barely leave your home.* These are lyrics for a song I wrote a few years ago titled, *Secret Love*, which expressed deep sympathy for someone I knew. *Secret Love* is a song about suicide, anxiety, and depression. I know so many people in my life, friends and family, who have dealt with these problems. I myself have struggled with anxiety. I believe that my anxiety developed from previous problems such as being bullied, both physically and verbally by different children when I was younger. One such instance happened when I was in the 6th grade when someone hit me in the face because

at the time I was heavier than most people. Unfortunately, there were many more instances of bullying which followed.

As time progressed and I started to learn how to deal with anxiety, predominantly through music. I have been playing guitar and writing music for almost 10 years now. Music became more than a hobby or a passion. It became who I am and everything I do. Music became everything to me and I found myself coping with life differently because of it. The majority of the music that I write describes my personal experiences in life, the lives of my friends and family, and love. I very much enjoy exploring various types of music genres and writing inspirational songs.

During my senior year of college one of my friends told me that interviews were being held for potential members to join a student organization named STRETCH. I always wanted to join a group of this nature or even start one myself. I was so excited about the mission of this group that I immediately walked into the room where interviews were being held by the co-founder of STRETCH and Executive Board members. I told them I was extremely interested in joining the organization and asked them to listen to a few tracks of my music and shared a short film I made titled, *Stop the Bullying*. This was a video I created and posted to YouTube in high school in an effort to demonstrate the tragic repercussions that bullying can cause. Everyone in the room could instantly see how passionate I was about putting an end to bullying; therefore, I became a member that very same day.

STRETCH has allowed me to use my talents to help K-12 students who have been in similar bullying situations as myself. Every time I present, I play my guitar and sing an inspirational song that encourages students to keep their heads up and to let them know that their situations will get better. It means the world to me to reach students of all ages and to let them know they are not alone. When I present to these children, they see me as a friend and role model. They are really able to hear me when I tell them there is always a brighter side to these situations. STRETCH is not just a group or an organization, it is a movement.

Sarah. I am of Middle Eastern descent and, unfortunately, as a child I experienced bullying and have even been a bully myself. As an adult, I now reflect on these incidences and am not proud of how I acted. In the sixth grade, I shared information about a classmate that was not mine to share, causing her even more pain.

I also experienced a great deal of bullying in my small home town. For example, in the fifth grade, a day after September 11, 2001, a girl approached me and asked, “Why would your family do this to us?” In the seventh grade, a girl who wanted to fight because she “just did not like me” chased me down a stairwell. In high school, a group of girls wanted to fight me for absolutely no discernable reason. They showed up in my classrooms to scare me. Another year, I received anonymous phone calls for over a month calling me fat, worthless, unlovable, and encouraging me to kill myself. In college, a man asked me if I learned Arabic to be able to say bomb correctly. The same year an individual approached me while I was studying to tell me my country (Jordan) was disgusting and

asked if I was proud to be an American. I have also witnessed students being left out by both classmates and teachers. I have seen rumors spread like wildfire through the school communities, ruining a child's reputation and spirit.

As a member of STRETCH, I have seen students at the age of seven listen to our presentations and understand for the first time that if a physical altercation occurs they should seek an adult's help and not attempt to take matters into their own hands. I know we have made an impact through our presentations, because students frequently approach us afterwards and tell us the strategies they plan on using in their daily lives.

I have seen many horrible things in this world. I have seen fights and have both heard and spread rumors. I have seen people broken from other's words. I have been broken by these same words. As an adult, I have an immense passion for spreading anti-bullying messages to children. I want students to understand that their positive actions, no matter how small or large, can make our world such a beautiful place. I want students to know that spreading hate to others will hurt themselves and their communities. I have experienced the pain of bullying and felt the burn of hurtful words. It kills me to see other people experience it and makes my heart physically hurt. As a member of STRETCH, I cannot always take the pain away for children. However, I can educate and inspire children, one at a time or in the masses, to step up against bullying, to share love and spread kindness.

STRETCH has completely changed my mindset. I take the time to get to know people. I accept people for who they are because we all have a story to tell. STRETCH gives me an opportunity to discuss with students the fact that we cannot take back our hurtful words and to think before we speak. It gives me an opportunity to share my stories of being bullied and being the bully. Through this sharing, I hope to encourage students to think about their actions, to stand up for others, and to think about the impact of unkind actions. It gives me an opportunity to discuss ways to show kindness. STRETCH has made my life so fulfilling, brought me a wealth of happiness, and inspired me to inspire others.

Samantha. Five years ago my life was affected by a terrible act, which occurred as a consequence of bullying. My life took an absolute turn for the worst, and I was faced with several new challenges. To be more specific, I almost lost my best friend in the entire world. There are no words to express the feeling of discovering self-inflicted injuries on the wrists of someone who means the absolute world to you.

During this time, she was in the seventh grade and faced several different challenges throughout her middle school years. These challenges involved both verbal and emotional abuse from her peers at school, struggling with schoolwork, and living through an extremely difficult family situation. There was a time that she just could not handle it all anymore. She had no outlet, no escape. Unfortunately she turned to self-harm. This was easily one of the most heartbreaking series of events that I have ever gone through in my entire life. Sitting through all her out-patient appointments and listening to how badly she was hurting because of the different things the children at her school were saying to her

could not have broken my heart more. The fact that such hurtful words could make someone even think about harming themselves is a heart wrenching experience. Luckily, with time, she overcame one of the biggest struggles in her life and found a new way to cope with different challenges she may encounter. She learned to find the positives in every challenging situation and learned that there were countless people who loved her unconditionally. There is truly no one who I admire more in this world. Her endless amount of bravery and perseverance is inspirational.

Ever since this life-changing event took place, I wanted to find a way to make a difference in people's lives. I wanted them to know that they are not alone. I then found STRETCH, which is an organization geared towards putting an end to bullying and promoting acts of kindness throughout the community. I was blessed with the opportunity to become a part of this wonderful team and travel throughout the area to perform different presentations for students in kindergarten through twelve grades. There truly is no better feeling than knowing that you are making an incredible difference in someone's life. Unfortunately, bullying is tremendously prevalent in today's society, so it is important for everyone to be informed of the various ways to prevent it. It is also just as vitally important to promote a more positive environment in which everyone can thrive.

Jack. I joined STRETCH because there was a time, during a long period of my life, in which I was bullied. I was bullied for being different than the other children. I did not dress like everyone else, and sometimes I acted differently. I was bullied for just overall being myself. The results of those recurring bullying events have impacted my life greatly, even to this day. There were times when I was hurt, struggling, and angry. I would take out my angry, frustration, and sadness on my brother and parents. I joined STRETCH because I want to have an impact on others. I want to show children that bullying is not the thing to do. I want to teach them that bullying can greatly affect someone in more ways than they would ever possibly imagine. STRETCH is an awesome opportunity to share my experiences, provide a positive influence, and to leave a positive impact on someone's life.

Conclusion

As research has shown, bullying often has life-long lasting effects on individuals, which may include: lowered self-esteem, suicidal thoughts, or self-harm (NoBullying.com, 2014; van Geel, Vedder, & Tanilon, 2014; Zwierzyńska, K., Wolke, D., & Lereya, T. S., 2013; Arseneault, Bowes, & Shakoor, 2010). Prolonged bullying episodes may have extremely detrimental impacts on an individual's welfare, safety, and happiness (Cross, et al., 2011). Moreover, these students often believe that no one else in the world is experiencing similar situations, thus increasing feelings of isolation and loneliness (stopbullying.gov, n.d., *Warning signs*). Even though all students may possibly be subjected to bullying, students with special needs are particularly vulnerable (Twyman, et.al, 2010; Van Roekel, Scholte, & Didden, 2010; Hamiwka, et. al, 2009; Weiner & Mak, 2009; Hugh-Jones & Smith, 1999).

As I indicated earlier, I was bullied significantly as a child. However, my true pain did not occur until I witnessed my son enduring the same fate. My feelings of guilt for not realizing this was happening to him were immense and still plague me to this day. Bullying must simply not be permitted to continue. It is the responsibility of parents / guardians, school personnel, and community members to work together to end bullying. With organizations such as STRETCH, I am hopeful that no child will ever feel frightened, alone, or ashamed because of experiences with bullying.

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About the Authors

Dr. Twila Lukowiak. As an Associate Professor in the Department of Teacher Education at Bradley University, Twila is a dedicated teacher whose continuing goal is to provide her students with the knowledge, encouragement, and foundation they need to become exceptional professional educators. Her research interests include academic strategies utilized to effectively teach students with specific learning disabilities and behavioral practices used to improve behaviors of students with emotional and behavioral disorders. She is also extremely dedicated to efforts in order to end bullying.

James Ghareeb. Completing a double major of International Business and Marketing Global Supply Chain, James graduated from Bradley University in 2016 with a Bachelor of Science Degree. He has since toured throughout the United States playing his music for thousands of individuals. He currently lives in Chicago, Illinois where he works full time in business and continues to touch the lives of others through his music.

Sarah Wadi. As an Elementary Education Major, Sarah graduated from Bradley University in 2016 with a Bachelor of Science Degree. She is a dedicated elementary teacher who teaches her students not only essential academic skills, but how to treat each other with love and respect. She is a beloved mentor and role model to the students in which teaches and coaches.

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Jack Walter. Jack is beginning his junior year as an Accounting Major at Bradley University. He has traveled to numerous countries throughout the world, living in the United Kingdom for several years. He is extremely committed to children and is the Executive Founder of the Crusaders, a lacrosse team in Morton, Illinois. He founded this team to provide children and teenagers the opportunity to learn the skills required in the sport, importance of good sportsmanship, and to build their confidence and self-esteem.