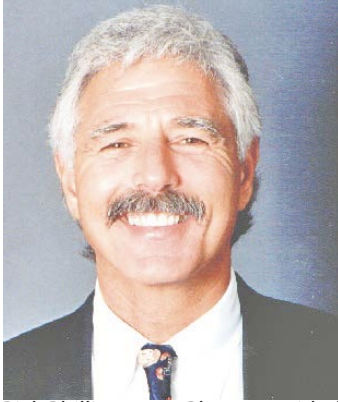


Rick Phillips – Empowering Teens to Make Healthy Decisions

By Sophie Braccini



Rick Phillips Photo provided

On March 8th, Rick Phillips will be the keynote speaker at the parenting conference “Living With Your Teenager” organized by the Acalanes High School District. Phillips is the Founder and Executive Director of “Community Matters”, a Sonoma County based non-profit that has offered help to more than 500 schools around the nation. On the 8th, Phillips will discuss practical tools with parents who want their young people to make healthy decisions.

"Students today are constantly bombarded with all kinds of challenging messages and have to make daily decisions about where to go in their lives," says Phillips, "they are under increased pressure at a younger age, while their support system is getting thinner." Phillips remembers his younger years, "My neighborhood raised me. There always was a neighbor who would see us getting into trouble and wouldn't be afraid to step in, or there were grandparents or other relatives close by to lend an ear. Nowadays, we live in a culture of bystanders who do not want to mix in. Families are scattered and parents who are themselves under socio-economic pressures, have not enough sit-down time with their kids."

Phillips is big on explaining

the debilitating impact of the bystanders' culture. We mind our own business; we don't want to get involved. But Phillips believes the best way to bring up healthy children is to create a community circle around them, which will support them and empower them to make good decisions. "I remember one of the scariest moments in my life as a father," Phillips recalls, "when I handed my car keys to my oldest child, praying he would make the right decisions and not put himself or others at risk."

During the morning conference, Phillips will share the tools he teaches to parents who want to empower their offspring. He will share communication tools such as how to encourage young people to talk by inviting a conversation but not interrogate and explain how to develop communication strategies for each situation, gender and age group. He will discuss the kind of skills the kids need to say no, while maintaining their status; how to teach them to stop and think under pressure, in situation where alcohol, drugs or sexual pressure might be involved.

In the afternoon, Phillips will address the issue of bullying and violence in schools. "There have been five shootings in our schools in February, this is unbelievable," says a devastated Phillips, "in most cases other students had information about the shooter's desire or plan, but had not reported it. In most cases as well, the violent student had been harassed and bullied prior to the incident, sometimes for years, without the necessary adult support." Here again, Phillips battles the bystander culture. His non-profit group has intervened in more than 500 schools to enact the "School Ambassadors" program. The strategy is to identify student-leaders who are trained to speak up

and intervene in situations that usually go under adults' radar.

"The power to create a safe and nurturing school is in the hands of our children," explains Phillips, "we identify the leaders in each social circle and teach them the language of non-violence, and give them the competence to speak up. They begin to be role models for the whole school. It takes time to change, but we've shown that a school can become a community where students care for each other." The program, costing about \$4,000, has been implemented all over the nation.

The conference will include a teen panel moderated by Phillips in the morning and other parenting workshops for parents of children grade 6 to 12. To register, go to: <http://www.acalanes.k12.ca.us/parents/TeenConference2008.pdf>