

Published December 18th, 2013

Students Drive School Safety Initiatives

Submitted by Theresa Schmidt and Diane Sharp



Sleepy Hollow Elementary School Principal Ken Gallegos and Miramonte High School freshman Stephen Schmidt smile near one of the new compass roses on campus. Photo provided

With campus shootings, and incidences of cyber bullying on the rise, student safety is top of mind for many Lamorindans. Four local high school students decided to take the initiative and make life a little safer for others.

After reading a story about school safety in the Acalanes High School newspaper, *Blueprint*, following the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., junior Megan Yee looked into the issue of student and campus safety at her school and at the Acalanes Union High School District. "During an interview with school safety expert Chris Dorn about ways to improve Acalanes' safety, we discussed that classroom doors should be able to lock from the inside as well as the outside," said Yee. "Acalanes' doors only lock from the outside; if an intruder were to come on campus, teachers would have to open their doors in order to lock them. This puts teachers and students at risk."

Dorn said some schools purchased small magnetic strips that teachers can leave on their door frames, and, in the case of an emergency, could easily pull off without opening their doors fully (the door will lock once the strip is removed). Yee discussed the door issue with the Acalanes associate principal, Peter Stewart, and forwarded him the link about the strips from Dorn. "Mr. Stewart, in turn, shared the information with one of our associate superintendents," said Yee, "and he ended up ordering them for the entire school district."

Miramonte High School freshman Stephen Schmidt was also concerned about school safety and began to research school emergency protocols. He met with Sleepy Hollow Elementary School Principal Ken Gallegos to discuss safety ideas as part of his Eagle Scout project. Schmidt learned that in an emergency, responders would ask for a directional location to indicate a particular site on campus. "For example: 'The earthquake damage is in the playground bathrooms, located on the western part of the campus,'" he explained. But quickly communicating the directional

location of a disaster can be difficult, so Schmidt suggested installing two-foot diameter, five-color compass roses at seven strategic locations on the campus and training students and staff how to use them so they could easily determine north, south, east and west from several locations on campus. He hopes to expand the Campus Compass Project to all Lamorinda schools and across the nation.

For Miramonte senior Nick Coufal, the issue of student safety took a different turn when his sister, Sarah, was severely cyber-bullied. "Someone stole her identity and opened an Ask.fm account impersonating her," he said. "There were hundreds of fraudulent and appalling posts." Ironically, Coufal won as student body president with his anti-bullying campaign.

Coufal persuaded the principal at Miramonte to show the film, "The Bully Project" about five bullied teens, and to conduct a survey that would uncover how and where bullying was taking place. He also created posters and incorporated a "bully fact" in each of his daily broadcasts on the school PA system, and the vice principal asked him to help write the lesson plan for the day of the film. "Follow-up questions generated thoughtful discussions about creating a more inclusive environment, safe Internet practices, and abandoning intellectual superiority," he said. "To give bystanders tools to combat bullying, I developed a handout called '10 Ways to be an Upstander.'" Coufal is planning future assemblies where experts will give on-going training to bystanders and victims, and several other schools plan to show the film thanks to his efforts.

Another senior at Acalanes High School, Brian Lilienstein, also made a difference after a personal experience. When he was 13 years old, he helplessly watched as a man died on a street after jumping from his vehicle. "I sat stunned with no idea what to do," said Lilienstein. "That night has haunted me. It was the most terrifying and defining moment of my life. I never again wanted to feel so helpless." He decided he needed to know CPR, and began work to develop a training program for students (see the related story at <http://www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue0717/Brothers-Take-CPR-Training-to-Las-Lomas-High-School-Honoring-Wrestlers-Memory.html>). To

date, Lilienstein and many others involved in the program have helped train over 1,500 high school and middle school students in CPR.

These students went beyond simple curiosity, or even a desire to make a difference - they took action.

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[back](#)

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