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## Learning Curve

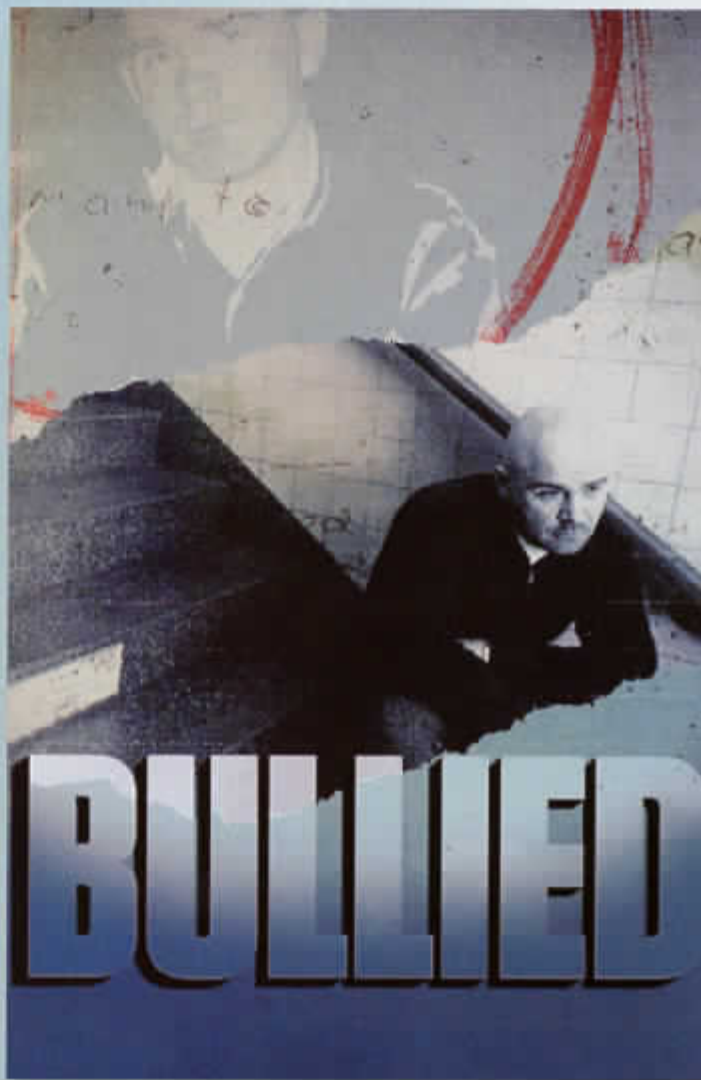
If You Focus on Purpose,  
You Can Light Up the Room

Dollars for Student  
School Board Member Scholars

**2012  
SUMMER  
SEMINAR**

**IT'S ALL ABOUT  
STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT!**

# Reflecting on a powerful evening: Jamie Nabozny,



*Dick Bernard*

In April, I spent two powerful hours with Jamie Nabozny ([www.jamienabozny.com](http://www.jamienabozny.com)) and others on the issue of Bullying in the Schools at a forum attended by more than 150 people.

We could have spent far more than two hours had we divided into table groups to discuss what we had absorbed, and my sense is that many would have stayed for the extra time, but the program itself gave us an excellent background on what is today a high profile issue, but which has a history as long as there have been people gathered in community.

Mention the word "bullying" these days, and there is near universal recognition of the term as it applies to children and schools. Suicides increase the awareness, for a time, at least. But the greater crisis is in the silence of the victims (far more numerous than those who die by suicide) and in communities unwilling or unable to face up to their own responsibility in the matter of allowing bullying to exist. Bullying is a societal problem, even in these days when attention is called to it.

## Jamie Nabozny's story of bullying

Jamie Nabozny was an unfamiliar name to me when we in World Citizen ([www.peacesites.org](http://www.peacesites.org)) arranged for his presentation last fall. Jamie grew up in Ashland, Wisconsin, and now lives in Minnesota.

He is the subject of the 38-minute film BULLIED. Jamie's ordeal began in 1987-88 when he was a seventh grader in Ashland. This was long before Facebook (founded 2004), YouTube (2005), Twitter (2006) and even e-mail as social network vehicles for bullying.

Jamie's abusers were fellow students, and little apparent attention was paid to his plight. The reporting chain stopped at the middle and later high school office level.

This was in the time when expressions like "act like a man," or "boys will be boys," and similar advice for girls were still easy escapes from a community taking responsibility for dealing with the bullying problem.

BULLIED is available free to schools through the organization Teaching Tolerance, <http://www.tolerance.org/bullied>. It is an excellent teaching tool in itself. It shows why an institution, the Ashland Public Schools, found itself in serious legal jeopardy.

The possibilities of doing something positive and constructive about the problem of bullying came from Jamie and others in the post-film discussion, which also involved the panel and those who asked questions or made statements from the audience, which seemed to well represent the community at large. In preparing this article, I asked Mr. Nabozny if there was any specific information he'd like to share with the readers of the *Journal*.

## Mr. Nabozny offers these suggestions:

**Focus on Prevention:** Every school needs to put time and resources into preventing bullying, and empathy training must be at the heart of this effort.

**Need for a Comprehensive Approach:** Schools need to address and help all students when bullying occurs, not just the victim. They need to give bystanders the tools and permission to stand up to bullying. They need to make sure they do not just punish the student who is doing the bullying, but they need to get to the bottom of why bullies are doing it and give them the help they need. They also need to make sure the victims are not internalizing the messages they have received. Students should be involved in every stage of developing and implementing any and all bullying programs.

**Attention to Environmental Factors:** Students don't come to school and learn how to be bigoted and intolerant. They learn these behaviors from many places including home, places of worship, and society at large. A school's responsibility is to help students unlearn these harmful attitudes and set them up for success in the very diverse world we live in.

## Thoughts from other schools on preventing bullying

Melanie Dewitt and Sandy Curry are Bully Prevention Coordinators from Clear Springs Elementary School in Minnetonka. They called the forum "inspiring and thought-provoking." Their school, Clear Springs, has been an International Peace Site for over 20 years (information about peace sites at <http://www.peacesites.org/sites/about>).

"Being a Peace Site means that we are a 'safe school' that embraces nonviolent conflict resolution, believes in caring for our environment, celebrates diversity and demonstrates that we are kind and respectful citizens where all people feel safe and included. These core beliefs reinforce our anti-bullying policies and further our prevention efforts. We are aware of the severity of the current bullying in today's world. Jamie's story touched us deeply as faculty because we feel we have the responsibility to keep all kids safe."

"Knowing this, at Clear Springs we have implemented additional strategies to help students feel safe and included.

- o We have rules posted in all school areas.
- o The rules are clear and consistent, and the rewards and consequences are followed through.
- o We have a positive behavior system where we give out golden tickets for expected behavior.
- o We have a 'Pancakes For Peace Breakfast' monthly for students exhibiting superb citizenship and leadership.
- o We have a firm anti-bullying policy and procedures in place to deal with bullying.
- o All staff have been trained through the Olweus Bully Prevention Program <http://www.violencepreventionworks.org/public/index.page>.
- o Parents have also been trained and are partners in our anti-bullying efforts.
- o We do whole school community building activities, weekly classroom meetings, and celebrations annually for our commitment to making this a safe, peaceful school."

## Summary thoughts after Nabozny's presentation

Writing one month after the presentation, and 12 years after retirement from a lifetime in public education (including growing up with parents who were career public school teachers), I have these observations and recommendations:

1. We adults have grown up in a system that has fostered bullying, and as a consequence we might best leave the process of change to the children, who are not yet overly influenced by society at large. We have all learned well the ways of the "good old days." Today's children can more easily break the cycle of bullying more effectively than we. We simply need to empower them.
2. Bullying is more a system than an individual problem. It is a part of the soul of every community (however the term "community" might be defined). For Minnesota, our community is over 5 million people, over 800,000 of whom are students in public school, in over 300 school districts. These days in particular, with things like Facebook, etc., "community" does not end at arbitrary boundaries.
3. The public school in any community reflects the diversity of the community as a whole better than any other entity, largely because it is "home" to everyone. There are no walls in public schools, making public schools the ideal vehicle for leadership.
4. Social networking is unfamiliar to many of my generation, but is ubiquitous and will not go away. Some might say the medium is in its infancy. It is both a force for good and for ill and an integral and universal part of contemporary life. We need to understand and appreciate how it can work in positive ways rather than simply focus on the negative parts.
5. There are endless victims of bullying, most of them invisible, including family, friends and others. Those who commit suicide are only the most visible part of the problem. Good friends of mine, whose seventh-grade daughter was mercilessly bullied by girl "friends" a half

dozen years ago, actually sold their house and moved to a new town far away to restore their daughter's sanity. I invited them to the program, and they came, but very nearly cancelled. They were not ready to face the issue, even as it was presented. Their daughter, now midway through college, and living within a short distance from the program, declined to attend. Once there, they appreciated the program a great deal, but they almost missed it.

6. Punishment of perpetrators is a poor second to positive relationship development. An empowered group can positively handle the bully problem better than a system of punishments. In Jamie's case, the chief perpetrator later ended up in prison for related incidents as an adult, and 25 years later still doesn't get it. Punishment, even prison, hasn't worked.
7. The system needs to have in place means of monitoring and remedying negative human behaviors such as bullying. In Jamie's case, in Ashland, reporting ended at the school office level. No one higher in the hierarchy was sufficiently aware to act. Jamie was back in Ashland in 2010 and made his presentation there. The Ashland system now has a requirement that such incidents must be reported to the school board so that the board knows what is going on.
8. Any opening to encourage true community dialogue to open conversation should be taken. Open groups without hierarchies, rules or roles can often talk through complex issues that are more difficult to resolve in formal structures. Every citizen, from student age through elder, would benefit from a program similar to Nabozny's presentation.

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