


EIU forum takes a look at bullying

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Kevin Kilhoffer

Mildred Pearson, right, speaks about bullying during town hall meeting at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston, Ill., on Thursday, Jan. 19, 2011. (Journal Gazette/ Times-Courier, Kevin Kilhoffer)

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CHARLESTON - Eastern Illinois University instructor Janice Collins asked Thursday night whether America is becoming a culture of bullies.

"Are we actually turning into a bullying culture? With people beating up others and being rewarded for it?" said the journalism professor during the town hall meeting called "Speaking the Unspoken: Addressing the Bullies in Us All."

Collins said bullying has crept into relationships, workplaces, politics and sports.

Mildred Pearson of the Eastern Civil Rights Office cited research that bullying is not about bloodied noses or black eyes. Also, it can affect people of all ages.

"Bullying is defined as the aggressive act with the intention to bring harm or stress," Pearson said.

That harm might be verbal or emotional and can come from surprising offenders.

Mike Tozer, an EIU counselor, cited research showing 45 percent of college students in one survey said some college professors are bullies. That might be overreacting to an affirmative instructor, but bullying can be present if it causes undue stress.

Bullying is not an eye-to-eye encounter anymore. Cyberbullying over a cellphone texting screen or on a computer monitor can do as much harm as a fist, speakers said Thursday.

Collins said that last category has become a crisis for America's young people with 13 children cited as victims of cyberbullying. During the meeting in Eastern's Buzzard Hall auditorium, there were images shown on a screen of young victims of suicide over bullying; the youngest shown was Ashlynn Conner, a 10-year-old who committed suicide last year over bullying at her school in Illinois.

How can this happen? Pearson said the bully gains strength through a "circle" of supporters. There are the "henchmen" who are positive toward the bullying, she said. Then there are the "passive bullies" watching the abuse and laughing at it. Disengaged observers hate the bullying but do nothing for the victim.

Pearson said victims of bullying need more "defenders"- people coming forward to stop the abusive behavior.

"That's our role. It's time we did something!" Pearson said.

Pastor Andrew Robinson said the overall suicide rate for Americans ages 5 to 24 has doubled in recent years.

"There is an overwhelming feeling of hopelessness," Robinson said. Many people have used their religious roots to cope, he added, but over the past five decades, since prayer was removed from public schools, many believe the "moral fiber of the country has deteriorated," he said.

He compared the top seven disciplinary problems in public schools cited by teachers from the 1960s to the present day.