

Breaking the silence on domestic violence ? every step of the way



The stats are sobering and they might shock people into silence, but as much as they shocked students at St. Andrew's College last year, it has inspired them to double down on their efforts to break that silence and be a part of the change.

This year, the local independent school is teaming up with Yellow Brick House to break the silence on domestic violence by hosting Step in My Shoes, a fundraiser for the women's shelter which will see hundreds lace up the shoes of their choice ? including laceless stilettos ? to help end violence against women and children.

The third annual Step in My Shoes walk will take place at St. Andrews' expansive campus next Sunday, November 3, with a goal of raising \$60,000 to provide women and children escaping violence with 365 nights of safety.

?Experiencing the event last year, I think, was quite shocking for our boys,? says Joe Commisso, Head of Community Service at SAC. ?We took about 10 boys to the event last year and it brought attention to an issue that needs attention. As an all-boys school, it is our duty to ensure our boys are educated in issues such as domestic violence and making sure they are able to be a part of the change. As young men, they are going to be the generation that can really push forward and ensure we're doing our part in making a difference.?

Yellow Brick House is committed to providing life-saving services and prevention programs to individuals, families and communities impacted by violence. According to Lorris Herenda, Executive Director of Yellow Brick House, domestic violence impacts one in four women in Canada and their

children.

?The issue of domestic violence has reached epidemic proportions and that often results in disastrous outcomes where a woman is killed every six days,? she says. ?If you count the number of women and children and family members that are killed, a person is killed every two and a half days in Canada as a result of domestic violence. We're hoping with our involvement with St. Andrew's College, we're going to break that silence that surrounds domestic violence because in order to work towards prevention and elimination eventually of domestic violence, we need to have the courage to speak, we need to have the courage to inform each other, to get young men involved.?

Men, women and children are all invited to take part in this event, raising money in the process, because it is essential that everyone understand that even if they don't feel domestic violence has impacted them directly, that is a misconception.

?It impacts them as a community when somebody is killed and somebody is suffering,? she adds. ?We know there are over 360,000 children currently attending schools who are living in violent homes, so even though you may not be personally impacted by it, you're sitting beside a child in a classroom who is impacted by that. The young men at St. Andrew's College, not only are they getting exceptional education, they're also developing their social accountability and responsibility because these are our future leaders and they will lead with their voices towards gender equality, gender equity, pay equity, whatever we need to remove the oppression that is affecting women and children in the community.?

Last year's walk, which took place at Upper Canada Mall, was the first time SAC students had the chance to take part. It was something of a challenge for the school, adds Mr. Commisso with a laugh, as he had to hit every area thrift store to find high heels big enough for the young men attending the school, but it was all worthwhile. This year, rules surrounding footwear have been relaxed ? come as you are, even if you want to wear flip flips ? and the campus is ready to make an impact.

?The boys realised it takes a little bit of effort to make a world of difference and I think that's what they are really interested in doing with this event,? he says. ?We have a beautiful campus we like to share with everyone we can, so this was just a match made in heaven.?

From the perspective of Yellow Brick House, the objectives are twofold: as a charity that works with over 5,300 women and children every single year, they have wait lists for their 51 shelter beds and cribs, along with their counselling programs, family court support program, and group support programs. Every dollar raised ? and every step taken ? will take them closer to reducing their waitlists for people hoping to recover from trauma.

?In addition to the fundraising, we're also counting on raising awareness,? says Ms. Herenda. ?This is a topic people don't like to talk about. It's wrapped in shame. Women feel ashamed. There is a misconception in the community that domestic violence only happens to a select group of people and one thing the boys learned last year is that it can happen to anybody. It crosses all cultural and socio-economic barriers.

?We need to change the language around domestic violence. We often hear, ?Why doesn't she just leave?'; the accountability is not with her leaving, the accountability should be with the perpetrator that is committing the crimes against his partner, his children and family members. I believe that the young generation is really taking a look at this issue and consciously they will be changing the language; how they speak to each other, how they address the girls they associate with, how they position themselves even in social media. It is that breaking the silence, changing the language and changing the attitudes a step at a time.?

For more information on Break The Silence: Step in My Shoes, including how to register and/or donate to a participant, visit yellowbrickhouse.akaraisin.com/ui/BreakTheSilenceStepinMyShoes.

By Brock Weir