

Strut for Courage will encourage kids, parents, community to speak out



By Brock Weir

Bullying is not just child's play. It is an issue one can encounter in the community, in the workplace, and just about any other environment.

This month, however, local students are preparing to hit the catwalk to make "lift the mask" on bullying, one fashionable step at a time.

Défilé du Courage, or "Strut for Courage", is the sixth annual fundraiser organized by ESC Renaissance, the French Catholic high school on the northeast corner of Bloomington Road and Bathurst Street serving students from Aurora, King, and as far away as Vaughan and Caledon.

Each year, students select a cause that is near and dear to their hearts. Past "Struts" have benefited the Children's Wish Foundation and, last year, the Canadian Mental Health Association, after a fellow student lost his battle with depression on Aurora's GO Tracks.

"We chose bullying this year because we honestly feel it is something that affects everyone," says Emilie Bouce of Newmarket, one of seven students from Aurora, Newmarket, King City, Bolton, Richmond Hill and Vaughan who are hard at work to make the March 28 event a reality. "I have been on both sides of bullying. Sometimes people take it to the extreme and we need to raise awareness of that."

The result? This year's Strut for Courage will benefit the Kids' Help Phone, a hotline providing assistance to youth in a variety of situations ranging from bullying, to anxiety, to domestic abuse.

"We chose our theme because by standing up and showing that you aren't afraid and can speak up about it, you're using your courage and you're not hiding behind the mask," said Nicole Quance of Richmond Hill.

Preparing to strut are 10 girls and 10 boys who will be modelling a variety of fashions, including coats from Boathouse at Upper Canada Mall, where Emilie works, as well as children's fashions provided by Osh Kosh. As they make their way down the runway, many models will be wearing masks that will ultimately be stripped away, symbolizing overcoming fear, overcoming bullies and ultimately finding the courage to make that call.

"A lot of kids are embarrassed as to why someone would want to bully them," offers Nicole on why some are reluctant to take off their own masks. "You just feel you are drowning because everyone is attacking you and you can't speak up. I find a lot of people just try to keep to themselves, [believing] by keeping it to yourself other people won't find out and it will suddenly go away. I find when they don't speak up and they don't talk about it with someone they trust, it also just gets worse and worse because they have no

one to lean onto.?

Adds Danika Bertrand of Aurora: 'Courage is such an easy term, but it is so much bigger than that. Sometimes I find myself trying to do something and you think, 'Yeah, I can do it!' but when you get to it, it is like, 'Wow, this is way harder than I imagined.' Courage is a lot bigger than just a word.'

For Alexia Chabot of King City, a student who was the beneficiary of a past Strut when, facing health issues, students teamed up with the Children's Wish Foundation to make her dream trip to Paris a reality, choosing the Kids' Help Phone was an easy decision.

'They are very accessible to everyone because you can do it anonymously. You don't have to tell your name, where you're from, or who is bullying you. You can be anonymous and they can give you an anonymous opinion.'

Not wanting to leave anything to chance, these seven students got the wheels for this month's Strut in motion this past September. Since then, they have been able to build awareness of the cause within the school community, as well as hosting fundraisers like t-shirt sales and bake sales along the way. Now that everything is just about in place, they are looking forward to seeing the fruits of their labour, and also hoping these fruit spread seed well beyond their walls.

'I hope the community enjoys themselves, see students coming together for this one cause, but also learn about what is going on, the importance of knowing about bullying, the importance of being aware of what is going on, and understanding the points of view of students and parents,' says Nicole. 'Parents [might think] when their child comes home upset they can just pretend like everything is okay. After this, maybe they'll understand more how to talk to their children about this cause and approach it in a positive way.'

Adds Emilie: 'Sometimes we think only kids get bullied when adults do too, sometimes in the workplace. Everyone cares about each other.'

Tickets for the March 28 Strut for Courage are available now for \$15 from the office at ESC Renaissance (700 Bloomington Road) or by calling 905-727-4631. Tickets will also be sold at the door for \$20 the night of the event. Showtime is 7 p.m.