

Brookhaven Teen's Anti-bullying Campaign

by JoAnna Sproles

Photograph of Kelsey Ann Jackson by JoAnna Sproles

Things are not always what they seem. In this case, the outer appearance of an everyday teenaged girl usually features fixed hair, manicured nails, long, flirty eyelashes and a complimenting smile. However, this girl, now 17, has experienced some serious doubt, isolation, fear, and betrayal—all at the hands of some of her so-called closest friends.

It all happened years ago, and emotional wounds have since been healed. Moreover, the cure for her injuries came with a remedy for future victims willing to take a dose by listening to her story.

Kelsey Ann Jackson's personality blends self-confidence, outspokenness, and a relaxed, open-minded view of the world accompanied by an adventurous spirit. Through vocal performances, she entertains crowds of hundreds, even thousands, just for kicks. You would not guess she was a victim of female bullying

by classmates in school.

Jackson, from Brookhaven, Mississippi, began talking about her experiences to other girls a few years ago. In groups large and small, even one-on-one by e-mail, she began to tell her story about the social epidemic of female bullying to try to make a difference. She named her campaign "Mean Girls Aren't Cool" and has since traveled to New Orleans, Jackson, Natchez and Vicksburg to give her story to entire school classes so they can begin to recognize the signs, treat the wounds, and overcome the damage of being bullied. She has spoken to Girl Scout Troops, slumber party groups, and even other high school students who mentor younger students

through the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program so they can look for signs of bullies or victims.

According to bullying surveys, as many as one-half of all children are bullied at some time during their school years, with 10 percent being bullied on a regular basis. Jackson decided a couple years ago to help other girls her age as well as girls younger identify two things: the signs of being bullied and the signs of being a bully. Hopefully, she said, girls being bullied would realize that they are not alone, that such behavior is not right, and that it can be overcome. For the bullies, she wanted them to recognize their thoughts, words, and actions as hurtful to others so they may be more conscious of the need to stop.

"There are so many sides to this," she said. "We try to educate the parents, too, because there are girls out there who are bullies in

every way but would not label themselves that because they think what they are communicating to others is normal social words and phrases when really they are destructive, vicious, and damaging. There are literally bullies who do not know they are bullies."

Jackson's presentation begins with her own experience with female peers who tried to make her feel alienated, causing a storm of emotional and even physical problems. Her mother, Jennifer, remembers



Top right: Kelsey Ann with some of the girls that attended the "Mothers & Daughters" event sponsored by River Oaks Health Systems at the Hilton in Jackson. March 2008.

Above: Kelsey Ann pictured with Robin Layton the Mississippi SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) State Coordinator at the Youth Leadership Conference in Vicksburg. July 2008.

Right: Kelsey Ann pictured with a group of girls at Cathedral School in Natchez. September 2008.

Facing page: Kelsey Ann Jackson pictured in downtown Brookhaven, Mississippi





physical health problems caused by the pressure at school.

“She had sleep problems and stomach issues that were caused by this situation; but because she would not talk to us about what all was going on, we did not know what was wrong with her. She finally began talking and telling. As a mother, it was a scary time and we want others to know,” she said. “I want parents to know the signs so they can catch them earlier if their daughter is a victim. If



their daughter is a bully, the parents should know what that looks and sounds like, too.”

Being bullied can cause low self-esteem, sadness, and even depression; poor body image, and possible eating disorders; headaches, stomach aches and trouble sleeping; skipping school and lower grades; and even thoughts and acts of suicide.

During her time talking with groups, Jackson said the most surprising discovery has been the numbers of girls raising their hands when she asks the question, “How many of you have been bullied before?”

“Usually, when I ask that, most of them raise their hands; it is a majority,” she said.

Equally as alarming is the response when Kelsey asks, “How many of you have witnessed someone else being bullied and not done or said anything to help them?”

“That number jumps way up, and the show of hands is practically everyone at that point,” she said. “I try to stress the importance of not

just looking out for yourself but coming to the aid of others, so the bullies at school—and they are always the same girls—know that there is a line of defense.”

The bullies are often popular, pretty, seemingly perfect students who are often admired by teachers and others. Bully girls target friends as well as outsiders and tend to target girls they envy in some way. In addition, these days, they have the benefit of technology. It even has a name—cyber bullying.

“Cell phones, text messaging, and e-mailing are making bullying more secretive and faster for spreading messages,” Jackson said. “It is easier to do, seems more innocent, but is as damaging as anything while reaching more people and faster.”

At one of Jackson’s presentations in Vicksburg late in the summer, Rhonda Stevens and her fifteen-year-old daughter from Natchez were among those attending in order to learn more. Julia Stevens, a tenth-grader, was experiencing some female bullying that intensified over the summer break. She said by listening to Jackson she was able to begin working through the problems she faced at school.

“Kelsey did a tremendous job in helping boost Julia’s self-confidence and self-esteem at that time in her life when so much damage was being done. Kelsey came into Julia’s life at her lowest point after being bullied, and they stayed connected through e-mails to work through things,” said Mrs. Stevens.

Part of the solution in Julia’s case was changing schools, which she did last fall. Stevens explained that Jackson also helped her daughter through this transition: “She was just a great counselor and friend to Julia and talked her through the

scary experience of changing schools. Her program should be presented to every school for every student to hear. The problem is widespread and Kelsey talks about it.”

Even though Jackson’s bullying nightmare ended some years ago, for others involved in bullying, she is still fighting—talking, teaching, and mentoring so that someone else’s cycle with vicious bullying can be stopped whether it is the bully or the victim.

“I do it because I wanted to take a bad situation of mine and make it something good,” she said. “They listen and respond to what I am saying. Sometimes I can see it click with them; sometimes I get an e-mail after with a follow-up question. But no matter what, I get their comments, and they are saying it helped. The bullying is out there and all over. All of them will see it, hear it, or feel it, and I want them to know they are not alone and it can be dealt with.”

Kelsey Jackson offers two free presentations that include a talk, take-home handouts, and a short DVD presentation for two different age groups—one for kindergarten through third grades and another for fourth through twelfth grades. For more information on scheduling a visit with Jackson, contact her by e-mail at meangirlsnotcool@bell-south.net or by telephone at 601-669-1500. For more information and additional book resources on female bullying, visit Jackson’s website www.meangirlsnotcool.com.



Top: Mean Girls Aren’t Cool logo.
Above: “Back to School” Slumber Party in Brookhaven. August 2008.
Right: With K-3rd graders in Monticello at Lawrence County High School’s “Girls Night Out”. April 2008.