

# Violence conference arms girls with knowledge

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Sitting on a park bench, Alyssa White felt uncomfortable by the approaching stranger. He came too close to her, encroaching her space, so she stood, turned and walked away.

Suddenly, "the stranger" stepped out of his role-playing character.

"What did you do wrong?" asked Paul Henry Danylewich, the creator of a workshop teaching teen girls how to protect themselves.

"I looked away," said White, a Grade 10 student from Orchard Park Secondary School in Stoney Creek.

The pair tries the scenario again as about 60 teen girls from five Niagara and area schools watch during the White Tiger's Girl Conference in St. Catharines.

This time, White looked Danylewich in the eye as she left, without turning her back to him.

Danylewich, the director of a Montreal self-defence consulting group, said a lot of women and teenage girls stay put when they feel uncomfortable to show a potential attacker they're not frightened. That's the wrong way to go.

"He's not perceiving you're a strong woman. He's perceiving that you are unaware," he said at the Quality Hotel Parkway Convention Centre. "He perceives it as an opportunity."

Danylewich said his job Wednesday was to help girls remove that opportunity.

He conceived the White Tiger's Girl Conference five years ago in Montreal to commemorate Dec. 6, the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women in Canada.

Beyond lighting candles to commemorate the day when 14 women were killed by a lone gunman at L'Ecole polytechnique, he said the date is an opportunity to teach young women self-defence, prevention and safety plans.

The daylong conference for girls aged 15 to 19 featured Danylewich's workshops on self-defence, entertainers and a speaker from St. Catharines women's shelter Gillian's Place who gave a talk on teen dating violence.

Danylewich told the girls that being targeted for assault has nothing to do with how they are dressed or how attractive they are. Rather, it has everything to do with opportunity.

He demonstrated this by moving close enough to pull White's hair, because she didn't kept him at arm's length.

"This kind of stuff needs to be in the schools. It needs to be talked about," he said later. "I can almost guarantee nobody will grab that girl's hair again."

White said afterwards she was surprised by the gentle hair pulling. Her school friend, April Venne, said the conference had useful information.

"I think guys should hear it too, not just girls," Venne said.

The most common type of abuse is between people who claim to care about each other, said Jennifer Daubney of Gillian's Place.

She said a lot of abuse starts at the beginning of a relationship, so it's important to see the early warning signs, such as jealousy and over-protectiveness.

Females between 16 and 24 are three times more likely to experience intimate partner violence than any other group, she said.

And while physical abuse is the most obvious, emotional abuse is not as readily identifiable. "The scare of emotional abuse last forever and you take it everywhere," Daubney said.

She shared some warning signs with the teens, such as when their boyfriends don't want them hanging out with other people or they demand to know where their girlfriend is at all times.

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Signs of emotional abuse

- calling you fat, ugly, useless and other names.
- controlling what you wear, where you go, who you hang out with
- getting angry when you talk to other guys
- damaging property, like punching a hole in the wall, as a form of intimidation
- making you feel you're acting irrationally

What to do

- know you have choices and can leave

- listen to friends and family warnings because they could be seeing something you don't see
- never assume things will get better because they don't
- don't confuse jealousy with love and concern

— Jennifer Daubney, Gillian's Place