

“Words can hurt” By Susan Kirwin, The Montreal Suburban Coutsy of The Montreal Suburban, originally published 2005-DEC-14

Stephanie, a 17-year-old student at Rosemont High School, says her boyfriend sometimes calls her a “bitch”

“It hurts even though he's joking,” she said. “I fall for it when he apologizes.” Stephanie said she tries to ignore it but won't demand that he stop. “I don't want to risk breaking up just for that,” she said. “Name calling and put-downs are prevalent in teen relationships, but many girls say they are willing to put up with it. This and other issues on abusive relationships were the topic of discussion at the Montreal Girl Conference, held recently at Ruby Foos. The event was attended by Grade 10 and 11

Kirsten Nielson, a self-defence coach at an assault prevention group called White Tiger, and a high school teacher with the English Montreal School Board, spoke about her experience growing up with violence. Many times, she watched her father abuse her mother; he once choked her until she was unconscious, threw knives at her, and pushed her down the stairs.“

The police were called many nights at my house,” said Nielson. “I stayed up all night because I wanted to make sure he didn't kill her. Nielson knew that she would never let a man beat her, but when she got into her first serious relationship she discovered she didn't have a clear picture of what a good relationship was.“

I had no idea what respect was,” said Nielson. “I became, in a sense, the abuser, and I also became the abused. I let myself be disrespected, be criticized and I criticized.”

NEW FOR THIS YEAR...

This year's Girl Conference features a special up close and personal performance by singer - songwriter Katie Sevigny

According to statistics, approximately half of all women will endure a violent or abusive relationship in their lifetime. Nielson hopes to educate teens about the signs of abuse, so they will have the courage to recognize, and get out of, a bad relationship." She believes the portrayal of women in the media is one of reasons for the continuance of violence and abuse in society. “We don't counteract this misogynistic society,” said Nielson. “Girls buy into it... that's kind of scary”

Hannah Deegan, 16, from John Rennie High School, said verbal and emotional abuse is apparent in teen relationships. “Lack of respect both ways is a big problem,” said Deegan. “There's also a lot of bragging about breaking up for someone hotter or someone who is willing to go farther sexually.” Celia, 14, also from Rosemont, said that name-calling is a part of everyday life. “Girls are scared to say stop again because the guy will take it in a bad way,” she said.

"Nielson said many girls know physical violence is wrong but they are willing to accept other kinds of abuse. She said some girls are as abusive as the boys and described her first relationship as a roller-coaster. "There was never any physical violence but we could fight for six hours straight," said Nielson. "I was rude, I was disrespectful. There was no line I wouldn't cross."

"Sarah Weston 15, from LaSalle Catholic Comprehensive High School, said her friend has violent fights with her boyfriend. "They will fight to the point where windows are broken. "Nielson emphasized that any woman, weak or strong, could find herself in an abusive situation. She said having the courage to get out of the relationship is what's important.

"Nielson's mother finally left her husband when she was 65; she had been with him since she was 15 years old. People don't understand why her mother endured the violence for so many years, but Nielson understands to some degree. "I really hate what my father has done. But you don't necessarily stop loving someone because they are abusive or violent."