

Art contest spotlights teen dating violence

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Posted Feb 6, 2015 at 2:00 AM

Updated Feb 6, 2015 at 12:01 PM

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The contest, which accepted submissions until Jan. 23, will hold its award ceremony and presentation on Feb. 26 from 6 to 8 p.m. at the Hilton by Doubletree in Hyannis. At the event, executive director Putnam and Independence House staff will award contest winners as well as feature presentations and performances by Mentors in Violence Prevention students, a curriculum which Independence House facilitates in Barnstable, Dennis-Yarmouth Regional and Falmouth High Schools; a performance by A Lovely Dance Studio of Mashpee; and a speech by Malcolm Astley, whose daughter Lauren Astley, 18, was killed by her high school boyfriend in July of 2011.

According to Putnam, Independence House initiated the contest in December to highlight February as National Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month and reached out to local schools and extra-curricular school clubs to find students who would be interested in competing. While staff then left it up to students to respond independently, they received a spectrum of submissions, and she said the process has been “a great opportunity to help Cape Cod teens grasp what a healthy relationship should look and feel like.”

“One of the initiatives (for the contest) is to promote healthy relationships and to prevent dating violence among high school students, and beyond. We believe that it is important to get a broader community involvement when thinking about prevention and understanding what healthy relationships are,” Putnam said. “We are trying to encourage more teens and their parents, schools and organizations to look at preventing domestic violence, break-up violence, sexual assault, peer dating violence, bullying - and even digital violence.”

Putnam calls the submissions “vehicles of expression” that can help teens articulate how they feel about relationships, and can also give them the opportunity to “be brave and take a position.”

“We are trying to amplify the discussions that surround break-up violence - any kind of relationship violence - and this contest gives kids the chance to speak up in an artistic way. We are showing them that they can take a stand through their submissions and they can support themselves and connect with others,” Putnam said. “By giving them the tools, the education, and by promoting conversation they can define what they feel through many different avenues.”

According to Astley, whose daughter Lauren Astley was a victim of fatal break-up violence, by working with youth it can help “provide new relationship norms” in schools and in the community. “We need to nurture youth to stop being passive bystanders and to become active ‘upstanders.’ I want to teach youth to carefully intervene and help prevent dating violence. A way to do that is to support the growth of self respect and resilience in the face of normal rejections, losses and break-ups that we face along life’s path.”

After his daughter’s death, Astley has made it his mission to travel to different communities across the nation to educate on issues surrounding break-up violence, and explained that his appearances help him “get through the pain.” While he has never spoken on the Cape before, he hopes his speech can help the audience understand that by helping others “deal with pain in a positive way” they can promote people to “head away from the road that leads to violence.”

“Yes, this work helps me with my own grief, and so does helping others face grief when they lose someone important to them in a break-up, a friend turning away, or in actual death. I use my situation to touch on the importance of developing good skills in grieving and supporting others in their grief which shows up regularly in our lives. If we learn the skills in those areas, we help ourselves and others move away from pain and tears and on to laughter, confidence, resilience and the ability to connect again.”