

# Student summit focuses on abuse prevention

Mentors in violence

Heather Conn / Submitted

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Keynote speaker J.R. LaRose, a spokesperson for Be More Than a Bystander and a member of the 2011 BC Lions' Grey Cup championship team.

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A Grey Cup champion, teachers and Grade 12 facilitators recently helped 40 local high school students learn ways to help prevent sexual abuse and harassment.

Sunshine Coast Community Services Society (SCCSS), in collaboration with School District No. 46, hosted a Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) Student Summit May 3 at Seaside Centre in Sechelt. Students in grades 10, 11 and 12 from Chatelech Secondary plus students from Pender Harbour School and Sunshine Coast Alternative School (Heritage Learning Centre) participated in hands-on exercises along with about a dozen local teachers and SCCSS staff.

In scenarios that ranged from verbal abuse to sexting and lack of sexual consent, students learned practical ways to communicate that violence and abuse are not acceptable. They discussed related issues in a plenary session and in smaller male-only, female-only and fluid-gender groups.

"I'm not OK with just standing by and being silent when someone is being abused," said keynote speaker J.R. LaRose, a spokesperson for Be More Than a Bystander and a member of the 2011 BC Lions' Grey Cup championship team. "It's time we speak up and be a voice for those that have been hurt and abused. Speak up and break the silence."

This Summit was a return engagement for LaRose; he was the event's keynote speaker in 2016. He shared stories of challenges in his youth dealing with family addiction issues and violence suffered by his mother and sister.

LaRose has been a spokesperson for Be More Than a Bystander since its inception in 2011. This initiative between the BC Lions and the Ending Violence Association of BC breaks the silence surrounding violence by providing tools, language and practical ideas to be more than a bystander and to communicate that violence and abuse are not acceptable.

This year marked the first time that students at the Summit served as co-facilitators with teachers in an effort to make the event as student-focused as possible. The local tli'kwem Youth Dance Group performed a welcome song.

"We are so proud of the youth stepping up as leaders and change-makers at the MVP Student Summit," said Denise Woodley, manager of SCCSS's Together Against Violence programs. "Gender-based violence is a reality for hundreds of women and girls on the Sunshine Coast. These students can help challenge attitudes, language and behaviour that lead to violence."

The Sunshine Coast is the first place in Canada where high school youth have participated in an MVP program. This peer leadership model, developed by MVP Strategies in the early 1990s in Boston, Mass., uses trained student leaders to empower those who might otherwise be silent observers to situations where bullying and violence is unfolding.

The ongoing local MVP initiative is possible due to funding by the Department of Justice Canada and support from School District No. 46. Any organization interested in MVP funding or sponsorship opportunities is invited to contact Denise Woodley at [dwoodley@sccss.ca](mailto:dwoodley@sccss.ca) or Heather Conn, MVP Lead, at [hconn@sccss.ca](mailto:hconn@sccss.ca)

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