

## Officer resurrects anti-bullying campaign

### MCCC lecture presents poignant words: Improper behavior online could ruin future career

By Lisa Coryell  
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

WESTWINDSOR—A cyber-bullying expert from an area police department had ominous words for Mercer County Community College students recently: Improper behavior online could ruin their future careers, or worse, land them in trouble with the law.

“What you do at this age will affect you for the rest of your life,” officer Eric Potts of the Plainsboro Police Department told students attending his cyber-bullying seminar at the college. “And don’t think that sitting behind your computer you are anonymous. You can be found.”

His words were particularly poignant because two recent West Windsor-Plainsboro graduates face criminal charges for online harassment of a fellow freshman at Rutgers University who later committed suicide.

“You had a kid jump off a bridge because what happened to him on the internet was so devastating,” Potts said. “And these two kids (who surreptitiously monitored and streamed his homosexual encounter on the internet), their lives are ruined too. Everybody knows who they are and what they did.”

The suicide in September of 18-year-old Tyler Clementi

of Ridgewood and the subsequent charges against Dharun Ravi, 18, of Plainsboro, and Molly Wei, 18, of West Windsor have thrust the issue of cyber-bullying into the national media spotlight.

Potts thought the time was ideal to resurrect his department’s anti-bullying campaign and present it to an audience that had every reason to listen.

Statistics show that incidents of cyber-bullying — defined as repeated online harassment and torment against a targeted individual — are on the rise across the country. According to the National Crime Prevention Center, 40 percent of all teens with access to the internet have reported being bullied online. Chat rooms, social networking web sites, e-mail and instant message systems are the most common arenas for the behavior.

Teens attending the seminar said what Potts defined as bullying — generating false rumors, making slanderous remarks, ridiculing, humiliating and threatening others — has become the norm for teens.

“It’s very prevalent and very aggressive,” said sophomore Alexis Sweet from Trenton. “It’s actually become the social norm. It doesn’t matter if you’re a good person or a bad

person ... everybody does it.” Many sheepishly admitted they’ve been guilty of bullying others.

“Yeah, I think I have,” said

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Kyle Miller, a Nottingham High School student taking classes at the community college. “I’ve called people names when I shouldn’t have.”

One student, 29-year-old Gaytrie Naitram-Velazquez, said she was bullied as a student at Trenton Central High School in 2000.

But at least that torment — pushing, shoving, getting pelted with snowballs — stopped when she went home.

“For those few hours I didn’t have to deal with the stress and stigma of being bullied,” she said. “Today, the internet really ups the ante. People can bully you at home. Kids don’t get a break. And when it’s online, more people can see and more people can participate.”

Potts’ appearance at the community college was arranged by Elizabeth Bondurant, a retired Plainsboro police officer who now teaches criminal justice at the school.

“Cyber-bullying is a topic that’s been in the news,” she said. “I wanted to start a dialogue to make kids aware that they’re responsible for their own behavior online.”

