Presidential Fellow: Progress at MARC: Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State College

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At two o’clock, on a cold February afternoon in 1996, a fourteen year old boy walked into his Washington Junior High School and behaved in a way that his teacher could never have anticipated. Armed with two guns, he shot and killed two of his classmates and his teacher. Had that teacher had the right kind of professional training, she might have been able to recognize the student’s emotional and behavioral problems, and might also have been able to intervene when she did earlier. Eight years later, the United States is reeling from a series of school shootings and requiring teachers, more than ever, to understand and intervene with students who have behavioral problems leading to violence.

K–12 educators today know that their job is not what it was two decades ago. For example, what should a fourth grade teacher do if she or he discovers that one of the students in the class has been extorting money from another student, threatening the victim with a beating if the money is not paid every week? Despite their hunger for training in behavioral problems and aggression, most teacher-training institutions, including Bridgewater State College, do not offer systematic education about childhood aggression. This remains true despite a renewed emphasis on researching the causes of childhood aggression among higher education faculty and other researchers. Psychology programs often offer elective courses focusing on this topic, and my own book, Understanding Violence, focuses entirely on a review of the vast array of experimental studies examining the causes and contributing factors to such behavior. However, many K–12 educators leave their training and are never found. I was told that Jerry’s widow, Charlotte, remarried several years after his disappearance. Jerry’s three children grew to adulthood. The correspondence helped them understand how difficult his life had been and convinced them that he had not left his family willingly. As for me, I will always treasure the Thank You note that my father received from Jerry’s daughter, Marion, who wept when I spoke with her on the telephone. She died a few years later. Making contact with the Brophys somehow provided me with the sense of reclaiming a family and, perhaps, in some way, seeing Jerry home.
The Presidential Fellowship has allowed me to make great progress in establishing the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center (MARC) here at Bridgewater State College. It is designed to be a high-quality, low-cost service to help prevent bullying. In that effort, a multitude of services have been developed within MARC. The Center has already hosted six conferences here at BSC on a variety of topics about children and violence. There is a MARC Anti-Bullying Program for K-12 students—arguably our most popular program. It works intensively with children, teachers, administrators, and parents to begin to change school climates so bullying is no longer considered a high-status, desirable behavior. The program has age-appropriate curriculum, hands-on situation-centered faculty training and concrete suggestions for administration and policy so they can cope effectively with aggressive behavior by children in their schools. MARC, a training Center, has a strong focus on training BSC students to work as facilitators so they can teach adolescent students how to begin to think about their school climate, and how to begin to plan to change it. A major goal of MARC is to teach younger children to be conscious of bullying behaviors, and to empower older children to begin to address this problem among themselves.

The Student Associates and Facilitators are a critical part of our collaborations with schools. For example, three undergraduate facilitators recently worked with a group of students in a Middle School in southeastern Massachusetts. The group learned to identify bullying and harassment behaviors which they felt were objectionable. They discussed how they should take responsibility for starting to change the climate in their school, and they began to plan student-led programs which might reduce the bullying they saw on a daily basis. One such program was a Lunchtime Program, where 8th graders would be trained to visit several lunch tables during each lunchtime to help guide the conversations to reduce bullying and abuse, and to help other students recognize the destructiveness of this behavior.

This is a student-initiated, student-conceived, and student-led program, brought about through the facilitation and funding offered by the students’ older, collegiate peers.

Another example of how expertise from MARC has been employed during the initial year of its existence took place in an elementary school in Walpole. In that school it had long been the practice to require a child who was found to have been bullying a classmate, to write a letter of apology to his or her victim. Through MARC training, we communicated to administration and faculty the drawbacks of involving victims in remedies for any bullying incident. In this case, having a bully write an apology letter to a victim can be counter-productive because such letters can readily be read by that victim as a further threat. In fact, the between-the-lines message sent by such a letter is often, “I know that you told me.” Disciplining a bully in isolation from the victim actually increases the reporting of bullying if victims and potential victims don’t have to be involved with their tormentor in any way. Though MARC is only in its first year of operation, we can point at progress we have made toward fulfilling some of the important goals set out in the original proposal for the Center. We have increased collaboration between Arts & Sciences and Education by drawing student facilitators from both departments in both areas. Students in MARC programs are involved in efficacy research measuring the effectiveness of MARC programs. At the time this article is being written they are entering preliminary data and conducting simple data analysis. Several external grant proposals have already been sent out, and we anticipate using preliminary data in future grant proposals. MARC has become involved in regional and statewide planning, as a partner to the Massachusetts State Senate and the Attorney General, and is involved in the formulation of new state-wide law, policy and initiatives regarding school violence. Via MARC, partnerships have been formed with the Attorney General of Massachusetts and the District Attorney of Plymouth County. As the director of MARC, I am also working with several State Senators to help formulate effective legislation around school safety. Encouragingly, preliminary data indicates a positive reaction to the pragmatic, hands-on approach the MARC training takes in preparing educators to deal with violence and bullying among children.

—Elizabeth Englander vs Professor of Psychology

Judging by newspapers and television stories, it seems like we live in a pretty dangerous place these days. Just within the last day I counted more than fifty stories that reported murder and mayhem from every quarter. The Christa Worthington murder is in the news again with the arrest of a suspect after two years of investigation. Worthington was the young woman writer who was found stabbed to death in her Truro home in January of 2002. Yesterday a mother of two was stabbed to death by her son in the dining room of their suburban home. There is serious possible danger to drivers posed by massive leaks (not just damp walls) in the new Big Dig tunnels. Crackers have appeared in the brakes of the high speed Acela trains that could result in disaster for riders. And today the Boston Herald headlined, in a screaming one inch type front page headline “Rape Fear Grips City.” Some local television news programs seem to have become so dominated by stories of threats to our lives, especially by murder (the more lurid and the more local the better), that they have no time left in the broadcast for information about anything else. Why is there such a focus on the dangers of the world, and what are the possible consequences of being exposed to so much horrible news? It is easy to understand why newspapers and television stations produce these fear-inducing stories. They sell newspapers and build audience. But why do they? What happens when we watch a story about a murder in a town just like the one we live in, or read about a seemingly normal teenager who has been collecting guns for a planned attack on classmates? One explanation is that such information is useful to us. In the case of murder on the television news, we may watch because we need to keep track of how whacked the world is right now. It can be comforting to learn what the extremes of danger in everyday life have become. For example, we can use the information to plan to act so as to limit that danger myself and my family. Parents now typically drive their children to school rather than let them walk. And I think I’ll ask that psychotic boarder to move out of our guest room. Stories like these help us map the dangers of the real world so we can better navigate it. Another common explanation for our fascination with news of the dangerous is a variant of the explanation for why so many people like going to terrifying movies. It contends that people like getting “scared to death” because the experience reaffirms their sense of safety and security in real life. After all, if you can watch the awful stuff that Hollywood special effects departments can do to the characters on the screen, but still walk out afterwards to go for chocolate ice cream, how dangerous can the real world be? Every time you go to a film like this you psychically defy death. And it’s not just film that works this way. Great scary stories depicting human disaster have sold for as long as stories have been told. And video games like Mortal Kombat and Doom, which advertise themselves as “the scariest games ever made” have taken routine and extreme violence into the mainstream of play. But what happens if we confuse the reporting of disasters in the news with the depiction of it in factors? While mayhem may sell in both entertainment and in the news, this practice can lead to two kinds of problems. One is that we may come to see real disaster as similar to entertainment disaster. Those generations of Americans who are raised in the film, television and computer game era may have lowered ability to make distinctions between the murder produced for entertainment value, and the murder that really happened. Think of the cases of children who imitate acts they have seen in film, but have no idea that they would have deadly consequence for their victims. If by blurring the line between news and entertainment we become less sensitive to the consequences of real suffering and danger, we are less prepared to make good decisions about how to live the in the real world. I can’t help think of the similarity in the depictions of massive floods and wholesale destruction of life and property in the 2004 film The Day After Tomorrow, and the television coverage of the South East Asian tsunami that killed more than 230,000 people in December of that same year I remem-