

COLORADO SPRINGS GAZETTE

Silence Isn't Always Golden

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Hotline provides way for students to tell about dangers

By CARY LEIDER VOGRIN THE GAZETTE

It's not unusual for students to subscribe to a code of silence.

They keep their mouths shut about potentially dangerous situations for fear of being labeled as a snitch or tattletale. Or they worry of being ostracized. Worse yet, they're spooked by the possibility of retaliation.

That last fear may have been in play at The Monument Academy, where basketball players did not speak out about possible abuse by their coach. Parents of two of the boys told The Gazette their sons didn't tell because they were afraid of getting kicked off the team.

"This is a perfect example of why we have 'Safe 2 Tell,' providing an anonymous way for young people to give us information so that we can intervene early," said Susan Payne, a former Colorado Springs detective who started a program that urges kids to report potentially dangerous situations.

Payne, who directs the program and now works at the Colorado Department of Public Safety, said she spends much of her time focusing on those codes of silence — and advising students when they should be broken.

It's not being a rat to report if a friend is getting hurt, she tells them. It's not being a narc to let someone know a peer is the victim of a threat. When someone's safety is at stake, telling is the right thing to do, Payne said. Her message, when it gets out, seems to be working.

Tips to Safe 2 Tell, which launched an anonymous hotline two years ago, have averted possible school attacks, including one planned this past fall by two students; have prevented numerous suicide attempts; and have stopped instances of abuse, according to Payne.

The idea for the nonprofit program grew after the Columbine school shootings as a way for students to safely and anonymously report information about a crime or any situation of concern.

"We really talk to them about how they can make a difference, how important it is for an adult to intervene early," said Payne. "Kids know there's going to be a party after school; kids know where there's going to be a fight after school. The sad part is they often have a fear of getting involved or fear of telling because they're so afraid of not being part of the group or being retaliated against.

"They are often encouraged not to tell something," she said. "As educated adults, we have to recognize that they often don't tell us when something bad is happening."

More than 800 calls have come in to Safe 2 Tell since the 24-hour phone line went live in September 2004, each answered by a trained person at the Colorado State Patrol.

Assemblies to alert students to the Safe 2 Tell hotline have been held in more than 300 schools across Colorado — mostly in metro Denver. Aurora schools recently included a Safe 2 Tell brochure and hotline card with every report card sent home, Payne said.

Safe 2 Tell has yet to be as embraced in El Paso County, although Payne said she has given presentations in Academy School District 20, Falcon School District 49 and at one middle school in Colorado Springs School District 11.

Payne will soon get some help getting the word out locally about the program. Several employees at the El Paso County District Attorney's Office will undergo training in February to conduct presentations, said Lisa Kirkman, Chief Deputy District Attorney. "I want this message in every school in the 4th Judicial District," Kirkman said.

MORE DETAILS

- Safe 2 Tell has a toll-free 24-hour hotline that gives students — or adults — an anonymous way to report information about a crime, a potentially dangerous situation, or other concerns about a person's safety: 1-877-542-7233.
- Information about Safe 2 Tell can be found at www.safe2tell.org
- To request teacher or parent training or to set up a school assembly, call 520-7435.