

ory by Staff Writer
Mike Latona

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Staff Photographer
S. John Wilkin



Maria Rivera

That Cuts Deeply

their lives, and that's what they're going to do to get it," said Tony, 16.

"It gives people something to talk about," added Nick, 15. He and Tony are parishioners at Most Precious Blood Parish in Rochester.

These comments go a long way toward explaining the motivation behind gossip and put-downs. But can these tendencies ever be justified? Not in the viewpoint of Ryhan, who offers a blunt opinion on the effects of gossip.

"It makes the other person feel bad," she commented. "I think it's mean. Someone could be really nice, and you're just telling a story about that person."

And, apparently, the bad stories far outweigh the good ones.

"To put someone down, it's just easier. It's just an instinct," Tony remarked.

"It's easier to say somebody's bad than somebody's good," Maria said.

People seem as inclined toward receiving negative news as they are about spreading it, Erica Rivera added.

"If you hear something bad, you tend to believe that more than if you hear something good," said Erica, the twin sister of Maria.

Unfortunately, Maria added, gossip and insults are traits that children can easily pick up from their elders.

"People of all ages do it; you never really grow out of it. It's always there," she said.

Yet Erica said that even though she doesn't particularly care for gossip, she finds it easy to get caught up in gossip-laden conversations.

"When you're talking with your friends they say, 'Can you believe something he or she did?' and starting putting that person down," Erica said. "And then you say something, too."

Erica added that many people who gossip may be creating bad feelings without intending to.

"I don't think people would keep doing it if they realized they were hurting somebody," she said.

Is this type of chatter an incurable epidemic? Or is there something we can do to break the cycle?

Anthony isn't so sure. He admits that if he spoke out against the same schoolmates who caused one student such extensive grief, he would inherit problems of his own.

"Then they might gang up on me," he said.

Ryhan has a similar concern, saying that if all her friends were engaged in a series of gossip and put-downs, "I wouldn't know how to get out of the situation."

One solution — so simple, yet so easily overlooked — comes from Maria: Silence is golden!

"For me, I try not to say anything that would hurt someone," Maria said.

Her sister offers another quick way to defuse the put-down syndrome: say something positive

about the other person.

"It's contagious. Then people will say, 'Yeah, they're not so bad after all,'" Erica remarked.

An extra dose of compassion can help eliminate negativity as well, said Kathy Fuchs-Johnson, youth minister at St. Anne's Church in Palmyra and St. Gregory's Church in Marion.

"I always tell my kids that you can't judge people without understanding," Fuchs-Johnson said. "That's what Jesus did; he judged people with a loving heart and an understanding heart."

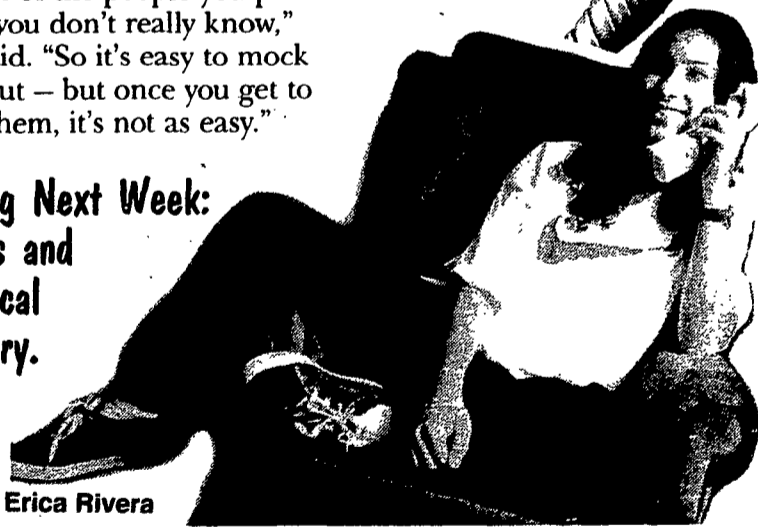
"You don't know where that person is coming from," she added.

"If the family is going through a divorce; if there's a physical or mental illness; a parent died; physical or sexual abuse; alcoholism; a parent who lost a job. Try to imagine why that kid is acting that way."

Nick voiced this same perspective.

"Most of the people you put down, you don't really know," Nick said. "So it's easy to mock them out — but once you get to know them, it's not as easy."

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Erica Rivera

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