

# On the MOVE

**"You want to punch them, you want them to stop"**



Story by Mike Latona • Illustration by Linda Jeanne Rivers

## A 'control' issue

What's a convenient way to make you feel good about yourself? Inform your peers that you're better than they are.

It's this line of thinking, said Sue Versluys, that leads to bullying behavior in youths.

"On the outside they're pretty confident of who they are, but on the inside they're not," said Versluys, youth minister at St. John the Evangelist Church in Spencerport. "The only way they can feel that way is to put down someone who's different or weaker."

Versluys said she has observed many examples of taunting and put-downs in her youth group, and finds it necessary to pull teens aside to discuss their actions.

"The kids don't even realize it a lot of the time," she said.

However, others deliberately inflict pain with their words, Versluys noted. She said that one youth-group member — whom she describes as being very insecure — refuses to stop taunting others.

She also observes verbal abuse in teen couples, usually with the boy belittling the girl. She has seen instances in which girls share their thoughts and ideas, and their boyfriends say such things as, "You're stupid; shut up because you sound like an idiot."

"It's a control issue," Versluys commented.

Unfortunately, she said, this activity often continues because the girls don't want to risk losing their status of having boyfriends. But sooner or later, Versluys warned, verbal abuse can lead to physical abuse.

Versluys said her youth room has been tagged a "violent-free zone," meaning that even verbal abuse will not be tolerated there. People who issue taunts and insults, she said, are singled out and encouraged by the entire youth group not to repeat their behavior.

Just prior to the April 20 shootings in Littleton, she added, St. John the Evangelist teens had discussed cliques and how they sometimes pick on new youth-group members.

"When you don't let people in — this is not what Jesus would do," Versluys said.

The April 20 shootings in Littleton, Colo., left 15 people dead: 12 unsuspecting Columbine High School students and one teacher, as well as the two alleged perpetrators — Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold — who reportedly turned guns on themselves to conclude their rampage.

Nearly a month later, Littleton remains a hot topic as our nation grapples with numerous questions surrounding school safety; gun laws; parental attention; and the influence of violent video games and media.

And, how much did verbal abuse play into the picture? Harris and Klebold reportedly told their victims that the shootings were revenge for having been picked on.

Although their response was extreme, the event did spur talk on the effects of taunting — why youths do it; how deep the emotional wounds can cut; what the long-term effects can be.

Two diocesan teens, ages 16 and 18, recently spoke to the *Catholic Courier* about their often-painful experiences with taunting, and their views on the Littleton incident. Both asked not to be identified.

### Looking for a target

"When I was in grade school I got picked on a lot. It got even worse in junior high. I would come home in tears a lot," recalled "Susan," 16.

In fourth through sixth grades, she said, classmates began spreading rumors about her, saying she didn't keep herself clean.

"None of that stuff was ever true," she remarked.

When she began junior high school, Susan would find anonymous notes stuck in her locker, calling her cruel names. Eventually the names spread around school.

"I told them I didn't like that, and it got worse," she said.

How did it all begin? Most likely, she said, because she "was not pretty enough."

"They were probably looking for a target. And boom, there I am," she said, snapping her fingers.

In addition, she said, the taunters seemed to derive pleasure from driving her to tears.

"I'd be told, 'Don't cry, it only makes it worse.' But I'd say, 'I can't help it, I'm too sad,'" Susan said. "Something inside me was saying that you want to punch them, you want them to stop."

Susan suspects that she further incited

her classmates because she reported them to school officials. More often than not, though, she quietly endured the taunts — and dreaded having to be at school.

"I really hated going. I didn't want to face them," she remarked.

A turning point, she said, came in eighth grade when a seventh-grade boy made a kind, sincere gesture.

"He put his arm around me and brought me to his friends' lunch table and said, 'See this girl, isn't she beautiful?' I thought, 'This couldn't happen to me,' because I thought I was the ugliest person because of what had happened (with the taunting). He was a total sweetheart. I'll never forget that."

Susan said that things continued getting better once she began high school, thanks to support from her school's peer ministry program as well as her father. (Her mother died when she was 8).

Now a high-school junior, Susan has a solid circle of friends and takes part in many extracurricular activities. In addition, the taunting has fallen way off — perhaps, she ventured, because everyone is maturing.

"Right now I love high school," she said.

Though she wouldn't wish physical harm on her tormentors, Susan hopes they'll someday realize how much pain they caused her.

"I kind of wish they could be hurt the same kind of way they hurt me, so they would know how it feels," Susan said.

Susan takes an optimistic view of the past abuse she has endured. "It's helped in the long run. It's made me stronger," she commented.

Unfortunately, she wasn't able to share her wisdom with Harris and Klebold prior to their attack in Colorado.

"I'd have said that sooner or later, it does get better. People start accepting you for who you are," she said.

### Fantasies of violence

"Michael" said he can identify in many ways with Harris and Klebold. A victim of taunting and self-described outsider, Michael has entertained fantasies of blowing up his school. (Harris and Klebold, in addition to guns, were heavily armed with bombs April 20.)

"I know what went on in their heads. It's nothing that I've never thought of," acknowledged Michael, 18.

Michael said he was verbally abused beginning in elementary school, partially because he did not wear stylish clothing.

Despite his efforts to fit into the popular crowd, the message became clear that he wasn't welcome.

"After a while you realize you're not going to be cool with them. You assume your purpose is to be alienated," he said.

A popular slur against him, Michael said, was "faggot." Michael, who dresses in black clothing and wears his hair past his shoulders, would usually cower when he was picked on. That only served to make the taunting worse, he reported.

Michael observed a curious phenomenon at work: Put-downs make you feel superior, and superiority leads to popularity.

"I don't understand how people can be such a—holes, and everybody loves them," he remarked. But this so frequently seemed the case, he said, he became convinced that "if you were an a—hole that meant you were cool."

By high school, he was "angry at the world" and fantasized about bombing his school. He rationalized that the action would be justified, because the people who were causing pain for others would be eliminated.

However, Michael said, he also would wish no harm on innocent victims.

"I could never bring myself to do that," he said.

Michael said he has attempted suicide in the past, but is getting special counseling to cope with his thoughts about violent behavior. He enjoys attending his parish youth group, and is due to graduate from high school next month. He transferred to his new high school after his sophomore year, and said he's experienced a sharp drop in verbal abuse.

"Sometimes I don't know what keeps me going. I think it's because I do have a few friends; otherwise I'd be dead by now," Michael said.

Michael said his own story should remind people that Harris and Klebold aren't the only teens capable of crossing the line into extreme violence. Taunting, he believes, could very well be at the root of such actions.

"Most people probably think they would have done (the shootings) anyway. No, I think it was because they were made fun of," Michael said.

**COMING NEXT WEEK:  
Catholic high schools retreat**