

KSI 9

Youth

ANYTHING BUT KID STUFF

Stopping teen abuse their dramatic goal

By ERIC STIRGUS

Special to The News

Omayda Figueroa vividly remembers a conversation she had with a friend of hers at the start of the school year.

At one point as they were talking, Figueroa reached out and grabbed her friend by the arm and noticed that she winced in pain. Figueroa took a closer look and discovered that her friend's arms were black and blue. The friend, who is 18, confessed that she had been beaten up by her boyfriend.

Figueroa expressed shock, but her friend told her the boyfriend "was just mad at me and he hit me."

"She told me I was overreacting," Figueroa said. "She said it's just a one-time thing. It's no big deal."

It is a big deal. In 1987, the Minnesota Coalition Against Domestic Violence released a survey that found more than 10% of teens experience physical violence in dating relationships. Another study found that 30% of teenage females who are murdered are killed by their boyfriends.

Figueroa, 16, learned about physical and emotional abuse in relationships as a member of Meltdown, an improv troupe that performs in front

of teenage audiences while delivering important messages on social issues such as date rape and racism.

The group is currently collaborating with the Brooklyn YWCA on a performance that highlights the problem of abusive adolescent relationships.

"If you can't learn how to love each other in a respectful way, you can't solve any other problems," said Bronwyn Rucker, artistic director of Meltdown and a social worker at Brooklyn Hospital.

Rucker said the violence can begin as a control issue. It usually starts with inquiries by the boyfriend over the girlfriend's whereabouts, escalates to disagreements about whom she should have as friends and eventually erupts into physical violence.

Figueroa said she suspects that the black eyes some of her friends have were inflicted by abusive boyfriends. However, she says, the friends nearly always tell her that the marks are a result of being "jumped" by a group of females at school or other circumstances.

"I believe them," she said. "I don't know if they're lying."

Often, some scars cannot be seen and are hidden within, causing perhaps even greater pain to those being abused.



MELTDOWN: Bronwyn Rucker (seated) and members of the Meltdown improv troupe gather at Brooklyn YWCA.

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"It's confusing because they're going through so many changes," said Sam Bryant, director of Violence Prevention Programs at Victim Services.

Victim Services has coordinators in four city junior high schools: two in Brooklyn, one in Harlem and the other in the South Bronx. Once a week they speak to a class of students in the schools. The coordinators have set up offices in each school where they provide individual counseling.

"We find that's the age that kids start to make serious choices for themselves," explained Bryant.

He said abuse is often the result of being a victim and wanting to victimize someone else. He said warning signs that parents and friends should look for are withdrawal, displaced anger, a drop in grades and changes in

patterns of behavior.

Experts say it is important to talk to and listen to someone who is a victim of abuse. It is also important to provide victims with choices and to be supportive of them — even if they decide to stay in the relationship.

Figueroa doesn't see herself becoming a victim.

"Seeing what's going on with my friends, I don't know if I would want to go through something like that," she said. "I think I would say, 'See ya!'"

If you are being emotionally or physically abused — or if you suspect a friend is — call Victim Services at (212) 577-7777. To learn more about Meltdown, call Bronwyn Rucker at (718) 768-1399.