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Portland Students Learn Internet Safety, Cyberbullying

by Joshua Anusewicz

With applications like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram available in the palm of our hands, using the Internet to connect to people we know has never been easier. But when it comes to younger people, who are consistently joining social media well before they reach even high school, it's connecting with people they don't know that is a cause of great concern.

Last Friday morning, Portland's middle and high school students took part in a presentation that looked to alleviate some of that concern by educating students on the dangers of the Internet. The program was presented by Scott Driscoll, a 24-year veteran of law enforcement that currently runs Internet Safety Concepts, a local company that meets with groups to teach them how to use the Internet safely and how identify and handle cyberbullying.

As a law enforcement professional, Driscoll explained that he gained considerable experience in Internet crime investigation; these investigations included things you'd see right out of *Dateline*, including undercover online investigations, possession and distribution of child pornography, bullying and harassment, and identity theft. While he explained his experience and what he has been involved in during his career, many of the students paid close attention to what Driscoll had to say.

When Driscoll fired up a PowerPoint presentation, however, displaying the symbols of various social media outlets, the group transformed into what you'd expect that early on a Friday morning: excitedly chattering, giggling and squirming in their seats.

"That's why I'm here," Driscoll said with a laugh. Driscoll then explained how an individual's "digital footprint," which essentially tracks everything you do on your computer, tablet or phone, never truly goes away. What you post on social media, the video chatting that you participate in, and even the emails you send "can be hurting you and your future," Driscoll explained.

With social media, Driscoll showed the students exactly how easy it is to find out information on an individual. Using screenshots from a Facebook account he created to monitor Internet safety measures, Driscoll showed

the group how, using "check-ins" and "geo-tagging" from applications like Facebook and Instagram, simple it is to find the exact location of an individual at that exact time. He also explained that many young people have hundreds or thousands of "friends" on Facebook and Twitter, many of whom they don't know, and that something as innocuous as a picture of a student with a school sweatshirt on can give one of those people information on where you live and go to school.

"We all need to think about this," Driscoll implored the students, many of whom were taken aback by how simple it would be to gather information on themselves. Driscoll also explained that the dynamics of programs like Facebook have changed – the average user is currently 38 years old, he said – and related a story to the group about a man that he arrested through an undercover Internet investigation. Posing as a 13-year-old girl, Driscoll was able to catch the man; after taking the man in for booking, Driscoll questioned the man, asking him his thoughts on social networking sites like Facebook.

When talking about that, Driscoll said, the man's attitude changed from scared to confident. "He said, 'It's like a dream come true,'" Driscoll said, adding that it still gives him "chills" discussing it to this day. "It gives them information on their targets and allows them to groom their victims."

Driscoll also discussed the rise in cyberbullying as social media has become more prevalent. He explained a personal story of how he was bullied when he was young, even having to change schools to avoid constant torment from other students. That, too, has changed, he explained.

"Back then, the bully wasn't going to come to my house," he said. "You guys don't have that luxury." He explained that many states, in the light of recent tragedies of teen suicides related to bullying, have cracked down on cyberbullying, making it an offense punishable

by law.

To combat cyberbullying, Driscoll told the students to be more proactive. He told the story of a local teen that came forward after a similar presentation to share that a friend was being bullied and was considering suicide. He said that because the friend stood up, the girl who was considering suicide was taken to the hospital and received the necessary treatment, averting a potential tragedy.

"I don't know about you guys, but that's a hero," Driscoll said of the friend that came forward. "If you know someone, get involved."

As for getting involved, Portland schools have begun to do their part to help students with various resources to curb bullying and unsafe use of social media. Middle school principal Scott Giegerich explained that students have begun attending monthly meetings about the subjects in hopes that talking about the issues, and perhaps airing concerns they have, will improve the climate of the school.

"It really teaches them that, hey, this is serious," Giegerich said, "and we hope that what they hear really sticks with them."

Mary Pont, the director of the town's youth service department, explained that just by listening to the students and allowing them to talk about their issues can often be the best remedy to a problem.

"They have a lot to say; they're smart kids," Pont said. "We hope that this gives them a moment to stop and think."

Pont explained that youth services has coupled with the school district and the police department to act as an additional resource for students in town that need help or are looking for someone to speak with.

"It's a hard topic and not a lot of people want to talk about it," Pont said. "But even if we can get just one kid to talk, we know that it does work."

For more information on Internet Safety Concepts, you can visit their website at internetsafetyconcepts.com.