



## *Interview with Sandra Brauer - Advocate at Clarina Howard*

By Meg Kuhner Advocate - BWSS

Bullying has claimed our attention as Youth Advocates over the past two years as we attempt to bring updated education to schools in Vermont. Sandra Brauer was one of the first to become familiar with and committed to the *Olweus Method*, attending a weeklong training in Portland, Maine and then working with various schools in her district. I interviewed her recently to glean her wisdom on the subject.

**Meg:** Can you tell us something about Dr. Dan Olweus' work?

**Sandra:** He led a research project beginning in 1995 that recorded reduced rates of bullying by 50% in his native country of Norway. The effectiveness of his original work has since been recognized and adopted extensively here in the United States. Stan Davis, a school counselor in Maine, is one of many who is using his research. He has written a book, Schools Where Everyone Belongs, describing his positive experience, and it was Stan Davis' training that I attended in the summer of 2004.

**Meg:** Before we get into the details of the *Olweus Method*, could you tell us some of the highlights of this workshop experience?

**Sandra:** Well, Stan is totally respectful of people and to the group process. He recognizes that everyone, including himself, has been making the same mistakes based on teaching primarily to the target of abuse, before we learned about the *Olweus Method*. Every workshop activity becomes a step to the next level of understanding. Participants have to practice what they've learned, so this requirement becomes a constant, group revision process. He is generous with his time, often giving optional workshops in the evening. Mostly, however, he models the respect that is so important to the successful implementation of this bullying prevention model. And, he keeps the summer conference small - only 15 people together for a whole week of training! The downside of this is that it is quite expensive.

**Meg:** So, what exactly is so original about the *Olweus Method*?

**Sandra:** The general misunderstanding of what bullying really is has led to ineffective tactics to prevent the behavior. Lots of people minimize it as something that is just a normal part of growing up 'so schools are just making too big a deal of it'. We have tried, as a result, to create tactics for the targets of bullying, hoping that this will discourage bullies from continuing this behavior. The opposite often happens. Teachers have generally treated both bullies and targets on a case-by-case basis, carrying, then, their own ideas and normal prejudices on the subject. This new approach realizes that just like domestic violence and dating violence, bullying is born out of a desire for power and control over another person. Therefore, it is the bully that we need to be concentrating upon. We need to hold bullies accountable for their injury to other children and then teach them non-violent behavior patterns based on empathy for others.

In schools, what hasn't worked is such inconsistency, asking targets to use *I-statements*, (This can actually encourage bullies to continue, gloating over the pain it causes.) and having the victims of bullying solve the problem by themselves. Bullies generally come from homes characterized by mixed messages - homes that are either very strict but provide little nurturing or from homes where discipline is like a jellyfish - the rules are always changing! Learning from these ideas, Olweus created a program that focuses instead on the bully. Aggressive behavior is clearly defined and easily understood by both children and adults. Consequences for such behavior are "inevitable, predictable and escalating." So, on a school-wide basis, teachers, staff and students clearly know what will happen if bullying occurs. It is essential that everyone in the school community has this common understanding.

Stan Davis' book, *Schools Where Everyone Belongs*, clearly describes the whole process in great detail. He has created a *house metaphor* that includes building a foundation of safe and affirming school climates, while creating the second story by holding aggressive youth accountable and helping them change, empowering bystanders, and supporting targets. The school staff creates a Rubric - or map - of exactly what will happen after the first, second and third offenses. These are posted clearly so that the bully can identify what the consequences for his/her behavior will be. Such Rubrics necessitate that a bully misses social opportunities like lunchroom or recess times, call his/her parents and write a "Think About It Form" in which the bully answers the following questions: 1. What was the behavior? 2. What was wrong with the behavior? 3. Who did the behavior effect? 4. What were you trying to accomplish? 5. How will you approach this problem differently the next time?

**Meg:** The form sounds a lot like the Abuse Report that IDAP participants need to complete for homework!

**Sandra:** I guess they really are and serve the same purpose - that bullies or batterers acknowledge and understand what they are doing. Building empathy for others is one of the goals of the program. So, building a school environment of respect for everyone is critical to success. Bullies need to know that their behavior does not mean that the adults do not like them. The clear map of consequences means that teachers can take action without anger. To further ensure that the program is viewed by everyone, including parents, as fairly administered, two adults take part in this process. One investigates the allegations of bullying behavior and another oversees the "Think About It" process. Students are never expelled. They go to all classes and only lose out on social times.

The program is way more sophisticated than we can discuss in this one interview, but Stan's book makes it really clear and exciting and possible! He places bullying in an historic context, comparing the problem with racism or sexism. He gives lots of real examples that make the book very readable and practical. He makes concrete suggestions about communicating effectively with bullies, targets, bystanders and parents. I would encourage all Youth Advocates to read the book and to try to go to the training in Maine. This training was simply the most important one thing I have ever done - for both my personal and for my professional development!