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Cyberbullying

Technologically savvy, today's toughs wield computers and cell phones while waging relentless psychological attacks against their victims

By Candace Murphy, STAFF WRITER

THEY CALLED themselves the Evil Angels.

There were five of them, maybe six, depending on who was friends with whom that day.

And their mission was to make the world of fellow sixth-grader Samantha Hahn a living hell. They did so with a few simple strokes on a computer keyboard.

"It started with a rumor that I was gay — I don't know why, it was ridiculous. My best friend started it," says Hahn, now 20 and the reigning National American Miss Teen. "As quickly as the rumor spread, the bullying began. My friends turned me into a victim, a target, and made picking on me the 'cool' thing to do at school. I wound up going to a new school, but the bullying continued through the computer. With the Internet, people can reach you anytime, anywhere."

Bullies are no strangers to childhood. Every generation has had its own. The '50s call to mind the leather-jacketed browbeater who took the first-graders' milk money. The '60s, for some, meant whispers, and worse, that so-and-so was a slut. The '70s and '80s welcomed Ben Davis pants, and the jock who paired them with a white T-shirt as part of a particularly menacing facade.

But bullies these days, like Hahn's Evil Angels, are distinctly different. Technologically savvy, today's toughs wield computers and cell phones while waging relentless psychological attacks against their victims. The age-old schoolyard strong-picking-on-the-weak has been replaced by a 24-hour-per-day, seven-days-a-week of online bashing using instant messaging, e-mails, chat rooms and Web sites created specifically to make fun of a peer.

Officially defined by the Web site CyberBully.org, a Web site provided by the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use, the act of cyberbullying is "sending or posting harmful or cruel text or images using the Internet or other digital communication devices."

One of the most famous victims of cyberbullying was Ghyslain Raza, a 15-year-old boy from Quebec whose film of himself mimicking a light saber fight scene from "Star Wars" earned him the nickname the "Star Wars Kid." The video was posted by some classmates to humiliate him.

A more sobering case was that of Ryan Halligan, a Vermont teenager who committed suicide at age 13 after cyberbullying escalated out of control. Like the rumor about Hahn, the most



JEFF DURHAM - Staff illustration



CYBER VICTIM: Samantha Hahn, 20 and the reigning National American Miss Teen, was a victim of cyberbullies as a sixthgrader. "It started with a rumor that I

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was gay - I don't know why, it was ridiculous. My best friend started it," she says.

vicious rumor that did the most psychological damage was of a sexual nature.

"Kids really suffer through their whole careers if they get on the end of a bad rumor, and the Internet makes that worse," says Courtney Macavinta, whose book "Respect: A Girl's Guide to Getting Respect & Dealing When Your Line is Crossed" partially addresses the topic of cyberbullying. "Pictures can be attached, Web sites set up — it's stuff that can stay out there forever."

Online meanies rampant

The temptation might be to say that kids will be kids. In the modern context that couldn't be more right. And it also couldn't be more frightening.

In the 2003-2004 school year, a nationwide survey conducted by i-SAFE America, a non-profit foundation established in 1998 to educate youths to responsibly take control of their Internet experience, found that 42 percent of kids have been bullied online and that 53 percent have said something mean or hurtful to another person online.

Of those surveyed, 58 percent never told their parents or an adult that they'd been bullied online.

And those are just Internet experiences.

In the Bay Area, Toni Cook, assistant principal of San Jose's August Boeger Junior High, has seen bullying jump from the real world to online with text-messaged rumors fueled by boy-girl relations.

"The experiences that we have is usually with the cell phones," says Cook. "We have kids that will come in and say they're having a problem with another student, and they'll show me a text message."

The cloak of anonymity that cyberbullying provides is not only an obvious attraction but an enabler. Not long ago cyberbullying wasn't a behavior limited only to kids. Most adults will remember the early days of e-mail in the workplace when "flames," nasty, anonymous e-mails, were in vogue. But an etiquette evolved among adults that hasn't among kids.

"It wasn't uncommon to get a barrage of mean e-mails, or even inappropriate e-mails sent within a workplace," says Macavinta. "But companies are so much more strict now. Adults are learning this etiquette in great part because of their jobs. It's reinforced by company e-mail policies. Also, companies have to save e-mail for legal discovery — they say, 'E-mails are our property. You're a guest on our e-mail.'"

To stem cyberbullying, schools are beginning to implement policies meant to keep pace with technology. Cook and her staff are working on a cell phone registry so that every student with a cell phone has a number that is traceable. In addition, as in most schools, cell phones must be turned off during the day and only used for communication after school.

Policies concerning computer use are constantly being tweaked as well. Piedmont High School devotes more than a page of its student handbook to all things Internet and addresses personal safety, illegal activities, system security, inappropriate language and resource limits.

But experts say even these efforts amount to a Band-Aid at best. Most kids have easy access to computers and cell phones away from school or at home, with little or no parental supervision. Even so-called "Web nanny software," products that are supposed to let parents feel good about allowing their kids to surf the Web unsupervised, don't do much good.

"These products don't help with cyberbullying in the first place," says Brook Larios, of iSAFE America. "But beyond that, we have a stat, too, about kids getting past filters like this. Over 32 percent of kids can get past blocking software. That's nearly one in three! Crazy. I just went online looking for stuff about nanny software and came across a whole forum set up by kids explaining how to get around these filters."

Parents on the frontline

While organizations like iSAFE and the Center for Safe Internet Use are helping to educate parents and children about cyber-harassment, most emphasis is placed on parent involvement.

Hahn says her parents got involved partly because the computer in their Metuchen, N.J.,

home was in the family room, where her parents watched television. When Hahn received messages like "Watch your back," and "Don't go to the bathroom alone," and most creepily, "We saw you last night. We're going to kill you," her parents were near enough to realize there was a problem.

"They'd not be over my shoulder, but at least they were in the same room. Even if I wanted to hide the threats, I couldn't have," says Hahn. "I would break down and start crying. My parents really quickly learned what was going on."

The reality, though, is that many kids are alone when they're on the Internet. So Macavinta and others recommend that parents or adults use software to limit who children can communicate with online, talk to them about proper online behavior and explain how to resolve conflicts in person.

If a child is suddenly afraid to go to school or go online, ask why. Let them know they can tell an adult when they feel threatened. And when a child is being bullied online, document every e-mail, every instant message, every threat that comes through cyberspace.

As for kids who are being bullied, they shouldn't respond, but they should report it. They should also protect their privacy and never give out personal information or passwords online.

"It's a terrible thing," says Hahn, who has made cyberbullying her issue, in anticipation of entering the Miss America contest, a pageant that requires each participant to have a platform.

A platform which is for her, quite literally, a bully pulpit.

"Even now, when I'm speaking about it, and I'm crying, telling my story, you have people yawning. Not paying attention. Parents saying, 'Toughen up. You're too sensitive. Kids will be kids,' says Hahn. "And yeah, kids will be kids. But there are degrees. There are higher degrees. It becomes really unsafe."

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