

# Tanis Crosby and Kathy Gomez: Child abuse prevention starts early with YWCA programs

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A well-publicized civil trial involving unspeakable actions by a former teacher at a school in Evergreen School District recently came to a close. One would think all we would want to do now is put the terrible matter behind us and move on, to cast our eyes forward and never speak of it again.

But following the trial we asked ourselves, "What is the most significant take-away from all this?" The disconcerting answer was that a group of young girls could suffer sexual abuse at the hands of a contemptible man, a trusted figure in their lives, and no one was the wiser; and that these girls didn't have the tools or the language to share what happened to them.

In a recent Mercury News opinion column, authors Richard Alexander, an attorney, and retired Judge Eugene Hyman wrote, "the time to start educating children to prevent abuse is elementary school." We couldn't agree more, and we are collaborating to provide that education.

It's become clear that working directly with young students is crucial to teach them to recognize, resist, and report abuse.

YWCA Silicon Valley has long worked with students, both at the elementary level and middle school, to help them learn about their rights, privacy and correct terminology so that adults understand what they're trying to communicate.

The mission of YWCA Silicon Valley is to eliminate racism and empower women. Central to achieving this mission is the response to and prevention of violence. The collaborative work between YWCA Silicon Valley and Evergreen School District is aimed squarely at making sure kids as young as kindergartners are armed with the protective instruction they need to stay safe.

For the 2015—2016 school year, YWCA Silicon Valley will partner with the Evergreen School District to provide Child Abuse Prevention Program (CAPP) workshops for all kindergarten, second and fourth grade students and Teen Empowerment Program (TEP) workshops for all 6th grade and 7th grade students.

Child Abuse Prevention Program workshops discuss the topics of bullying and sexual abuse in an age-appropriate manner. We teach children to use The Plan if they ever feel unsafe or unsure about something that is being done to them. The Plan has three steps: Say "No! Stop!"; Walk Away, and Tell Someone (like a trusted adult).

Teen Empowerment Program workshops discuss the topics of bullying, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and teen dating violence in an age-appropriate manner. During these workshops, we teach tools for staying safe such as: assertive communication, boundary setting, seeking peer support, and telling a trusted adult if one feels unsafe.

In addition, there is confidential time available immediately following each workshop with any child who requests it. This is a safe space for students to ask questions, share something they learned, or make a disclosure of abuse.

Last year YWCA Silicon Valley staff conducted 92 presentations and reached 2,338 students through CAPP workshops for all kindergarten students and Teen Empowerment Program (TEP) workshops for all seventh grade students. This year the program will expand as part of an effort to ensure all our kids receive the training they need.

This approach is a beginning, not a conclusion. However, taking the time to work with parents, kids, teachers and other staff, and to collaborate to give students the tools to communicate and to be aware of potential danger, is an important step -- one we would encourage other schools and child-centric organizations to embrace, creating a safer space for the most vulnerable among us.

Tanis Crosby is CEO of YWCA Silicon Valley, and Kathy Gomez is superintendent of Evergreen School District. They wrote this for this newspaper.