

“Peace begins with a smile.” This quote by Mother Teresa describes the simple, yet profound impact of a smile. Too often people mistreat each other with little thought of the lasting impact. Youth violence is a real and constant problem in schools all around the country. My school is no different. I have seen, first hand, the negative impact of such violence. There is hope though. It may even begin simply with a smile.

First, we must consider where and why youth violence happens. Everyday, in schools all over the country, students witness fights, bullying and disrespect of adults. This seems minor compared to the statistic that states that homicide is the second leading cause of death among young people between the ages of 15-24 (cdc.gov), but daily violence is overwhelming our youth. This is a sad trend that is often rooted in schools. While many youth have troubles at home, they should have a safe haven at school. Sadly, this is not always the case. Young people make enemies amongst themselves, though a student’s peers should be his/her support system.

Adolescents have cited media as the number one cause of youth violence. Children learn from their surroundings. Even when parents are doing their best, the media is always a significant presence in the lives of young people. It is not uncommon for young people to enjoy the tragic exploits of their favorite fictional characters, but the nightly news also reveals the very real tragedies plaguing our society daily. There are popular video games, like Grand Theft Auto, teaching youth how to be criminals. There is social media making it easier to reach people, but also easier to hurt others while maintaining some degree of anonymity. Teens will even record fights on their phones to watch later for fun. Many youth have lost a sense of self and have become entrapped in the values, or lack of, within a troubled world.

Recently we saw a story on the news about a school resource officer who was fired because of the violent way he handled a situation with a student. This is unfortunate, but the public rarely sees the daily struggle school staff has with students who are aggressive, defiant, disrespectful and downright violent. There was another video, released days later, of a

student slamming his principal to the ground as he tried to break up a fight between the boy and another student. When did this violent behavior become the norm? It is frightening to be a student, teacher and even police officer in schools these days. The sad irony is that schools should be the safest places on earth, yet they have become places where daily threats of violence are expected. So, is this our fate? What can be done? Who can change things?

Luckily, the answer is simpler than you may have guessed: you! We all, individually, and especially together, have the power to change anything we see a need to change. This will not happen simply by feeling badly when we see someone in need. We have to take action. You may be thinking, "I'm just a kid. No one ever listens to me anyway." So, act. Sometimes it is as simple as a smile, which is contagious. It may be standing up for someone being picked on, or stepping into a potential conflict between peers in order to defuse a bad situation before it gets worse. We cannot control the things that happen in the world around us, or even to us, but we can control how we react. Deciding to have a positive attitude, will breed more positivity. With so many people looking for a lead to follow, set a positive example. Help someone else, then watch them pay it forward. People just want to be part of something bigger than themselves, whether positive or negative, so why not be the catalyst to a school of positive people?

Violence has been part of society since the beginning of time, but we do not have to settle for a life of violence. We have choices everyday. Change can start with you. Anyone can follow, but who amongst you is brave enough to lead? I know I am, starting here today. "Be the change you want to see in the world." -Mahatma Gandhi