

COMMUNITY HAPPENINGS > Posted February 3 | Updated at 9:11 AM

Maine students learn what is not love

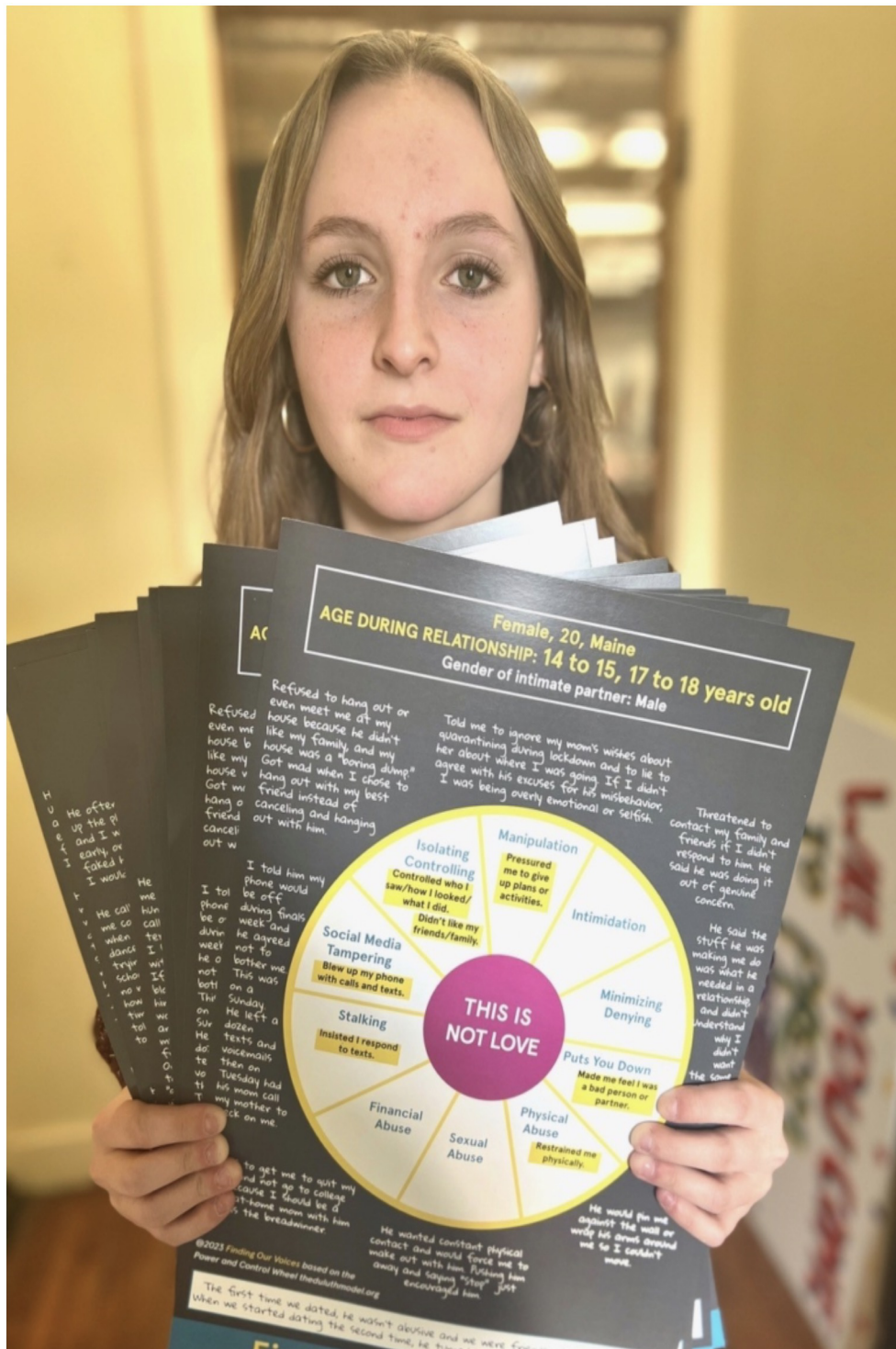
“This is Not Love” posters relate 22 different abusive relationship experiences by 22 Maine students aged 13 to 23 and are inclusive of genders.



Seniors Sydney Stone, 17, and Owen Berez, 18, put up a ‘This is Not Love’ poster at Camden Hills Regional High School. The students got more than 25 of the posters up in hallways, the library and cafeteria, and smaller versions of the posters are also going into every bathroom stall in the school. Photo by Patrisha McLean.

Through a new poster campaign launching in February by Finding Our Voices, thousands of Maine students at 135 high schools and colleges are learning directly from their peers about how it is not love for someone to bombard you with texts or say they will kill themselves if you break up with them.

The 11-inch x 17-inch “This is Not Love” posters relate 22 different abusive relationship experiences by 22 Maine students aged 13 to 23 and are inclusive of genders. Schools in Maine ordered up to 50 of the posters.



Aly Griffin, 16, with one of the 22 different posters she put up at Oceanside High School in Rockland. The Finding Our Voices posters are going this month to almost all high schools in Maine as well as some colleges. Photo by Patrisha McLean.

Owen Berez, 18, spent an hour before the start of classes one Thursday with Sydney Stone, 17, to get the posters in the hallways, cafeteria, and library of Camden Hills Regional High School. “You look at the things the kids are saying happened to them,” Owen said, “and say ‘Wow.’ But then you’re like, ‘Wow, this is happening to a lot of my friends too.’” Principal Jen Curtis ordered smaller versions of the posters for every bathroom stall in the school as well.

Patrisha McLean, president/founder of the grassroots Maine-based nonprofit group said the posters were created through online surveys that young people across the state anonymously filled out on their phones. The surveys are accessed by a QR code that is on flyers that were posted in various schools and are now on the “This Is Not Love” posters themselves.

“I remember being 17 and not knowing what [domestic abuse] was,” is the testimonial on one of the posters. The 20-year-old relates how she failed a class due to the distress and chaos of her boyfriend threatening to kill himself if she left him, not letting her talk to boys her age, and looking at every conversation she had on social media. “I never knew abuse could be verbal and emotional. I hope this information helps young girls in these situations know they are worthy, and enough.”

On another poster, a young woman shares “No one knew” about the five-years-older neighbor who for six years starting when she was 13 forced her to have painful sex, constantly called her crazy, tracked her every move and threatened to kill himself if she “broke off” with him.

Aly Griffin, 16, got the posters all over Oceanside High School in Rockland. She appreciated that on one of them a male describes abuse by a female. “I have a friend who is a boy who is going through some scary things with his girlfriend and he doesn’t talk about it. I’m really worried about him.”

Finding Our Voices is best known for a two-year statewide campaign of posters and bookmarks that feature the photo portraits and stories of 45 Maine survivors aged 18 to 81, including an incarcerated woman, a doctor, Governor Janet T. Mills, and the nonprofit’s founder Patrisha McLean as well as her daughter Jackie Lee McLean. Last year, 100 Maine high schools put up these posters.

Patrisha McLean said that for many adult survivors the roots of domestic abuse go back to their early teens and childhoods. This new campaign geared to young people aims to halt unhealthy intimate partner behaviors in their tracks as well as break the inter-generational cycle.

McLean said, “I remember when I was 15, ducking behind a car with a friend after spotting my boyfriend because I ‘wasn’t allowed’ to be friends with her. This pattern repeated in my relationships for pretty much my entire life.” Six years ago her husband of 30 years was arrested on charges of domestic violence and Patrisha said that this is when her eyes finally started to open to the many different forms of domestic abuse and how it is everywhere. This led to her creating Finding Our Voices three years ago. “If I had known at 15 that what I thought was love was actually abuse it could have saved me decades of pain.”

Rachel Moore is the director of student services at Lewiston High School and ordered 50 of the posters as well as organized a group of students to get them up. “Students don’t necessarily identify themselves as being in abusive relationships,” she said, “which is why this campaign is important. My hope is that by bringing them this information they can recognize these patterns and correct them while they are still young and forming.”

A 20-year-old on one of the “This Is Not Love” posters echoes this. From the ages of 14 to 16, he “would cry and beg me to sleep with him because it made his anxiety go away.” He “walked me down the hallways so I wouldn’t talk to other guys”. He “showed me a mark on his neck and said it was a rope burn from trying to hang himself in his dad’s basement after I tried to break up with him.” In her final message on the poster, she says, “I honestly don’t think he realized what he was doing was wrong. I never confronted him because I was also unaware it was wrong.”

Finding Our Voices is survivors breaking the silence, stigma, and cycle of domestic abuse throughout Maine, with bold outreach as well as sister-support that includes financial assistance. For more information visit findingourvoices.net/ or contact Patrisha McLean directly at 207-322-6460.

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