

# CHS students learn about cyberbullying at Law Day



Angelena Chapman/Daily Times

Students from Timothy Booker's street law class, Kathy Larocque's business law class and Kathy Hudson's family consumer science class listen to Gallo and Sinapi at Law Day at CHS.

## Local judge and attorney talk with students

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COVENTRY—From cyberbullying to sexting a group of high school students learned about the potential consequences of both from a local lawyer and judge.

On Friday, April 29 Coventry High School participated in Law Day.

This year there were three topics that schools could choose from: posting personal information and cyber bullying on the Internet, sexting or same-sex marriage. Schools could make a special request if there was an alternative topic

they wanted to hear discussed.

Coventry High School chose to have the visiting judge and lawyer from the Rhode Island court system talk about posting personal information and cyber bullying on the Internet.

Three classes were involved in the discussion, Timothy Booker's street law class, Kathy Larocque's business law class and Kathy Hudson's family consumer science class.

There on behalf of the Rhode Island Bar Association, that sponsors the Law Day events, were Superior Court Judge Bennett R. Gallo and Attorney Richard Sinapi.

Law Day at Coventry High School was organized by Donna Hutson, the school based coordinator.

Gallo told the Times he has been participating in the Rhode Island Law Day Classroom Program since he became a

judge.

Sinapi said he was contacted by the bar early on in his career and has been participating ever since.

For the last couple of years, both men agreed that the topics have focused on Internet related issues.

Sinapi remembers speaking on civil rights and things like freedom of speech in the past.

Gallo said they speak to the students to educate them and also get them thinking about some areas that might "benefit them," he said.

At the start of the presentation, Booker showed a clip from NBC's "Today" show in which NBC talks with the families of two middle school girls who hung themselves in Minnesota.

Cyberbullying came up in the clip as to a possible reason why the girls chose to take

their own lives in what appeared to be a type of suicide "pact."

After the video, more than one hand went up when Booker asked for questions or comments.

One student said that at first it seemed like the girls had overreacted, but "people do say really cruel things," the student said.

Someone noted that one of the girl's mom had tried to give her the best life she could, but pointed out that the girls were at school at least six hours each day everyday for as long as they were bullied.

Another student said that it appeared the girls, from things written in their suicide notes, were able to recognize that their school and family lives were separate.

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## Judge and lawyer give of their time to discuss cyber bullying at Coventry High

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What the girls didn't recognize, the student pointed out, was that school is only 12 years and that "your actual life itself is hopefully going to be a lot longer than that."

Gallo started his presentation by giving students a short history lesson on Law Day.

He said that it was proclaimed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower some 50 odd years ago. It is on the last Friday in April that it is celebrated in Rhode Island.

He talked briefly about the United States being "under rule of law" as opposed to having "authoritative leadership."

As he began to talk about the specific topic, he told students there was probably a lot that they could teach him about all the technology out there.

He said everyone these days has access to a computer and that he would be shocked if anyone in the room did not have a cell phone capable of text and or picture messaging.

"If we wanted to research something we went to the library and got into the dusty old books," he said, contrasting the past with the present.

We are "simply here to remind you there is a serious side to all this technology," he said.

"You can't forget," Gallo told the students, "when you put information out there—it is for the world to see."

He told the students to take advantage of pri-

vacuity settings and not communicate with people they didn't know.

He also told them not to post anything that they "wouldn't want any responsible adult or someone in authority to see."

He mentioned how employers, colleges and police all have computers.

He told the students that posting certain information about friends could put the friends at risk and "if done in a harmful way" create problems for the students themselves.

He handed out a copy of Rhode Island General Law 11-52-4.2 "Cyberstalking and cyberharassment prohibited."

The law states that "Whoever transmits any communication by computer or other electronic device to any person or causes any person to be contacted for the sole purpose of harassing that person or his or her family is guilty of a misdemeanor."

It goes on to say "For the purpose of this section, 'harassing' means any knowing and willful course of conduct directed at a specific person which seriously alarms, annoys, or bothers the person, and which serves no legitimate purpose."

The first conviction is a misdemeanor and a second or subsequent conviction is a felony. Punishments can include a fine of up to \$500, imprisonment for up to a year or both for the misdemeanor conviction and imprisonment for up to two years, a fine of up to \$6,000 or both for a felony conviction.

Gallo pointed out that saying the person "was too weak" to handle the [harassment] is "not a defense."

Gallo did ask the students about sexting, though it wasn't the main topic, but none raised a hand to offer a situation where they knew that it had occurred.

"I didn't think I'd get any hands," Gallo said. Booker commented that it may be too sensitive of a topic for the students.

Sinapi spoke after Gallo, highlighting the terms used in the above referenced law, such as "alarm," "annoy" or "bother" and how that was all it took to break the law.

He used the example of being mad at a girlfriend or boyfriend and how sending a series of [harassing] text messages could fit the law's description.

Due to the lack of face-to-face interaction "now everybody becomes brave," Sinapi said, when in the past it "used to just be the big guys" who were bullies.

Sinapi said, however, that courts will issue subpoenas for everything from the network provider to the ISP address and "They will find you," he said.

"Think about it," he said, "They can and they will find you," he told them.

He went on to talk about how whether students are punished by a court of law, giving them a criminal record, or in their school district with something that will go on their permanent record, there are consequences for these actions—things

that could keep the students out of college or from getting the job they want

When something is put on the Internet, Sinapi said, "everybody has access to it" and it is there "potentially forever."

He also talked about sexting, telling kids that unless they wanted to get an early start in that profession, "don't even take a picture like that," he said, noting that someone else could put the picture online.

Sinapi talked about a Constitutional defense and First Amendment protection for "pure opinions" on some of these topics, but told students they did not want to hire a lawyer like himself and pay him \$300 an hour to try and argue that type of defense.

He said that the technology mentioned "are all great things if used properly," but if misused had "grave" and "long-term, bad consequences" for students.

"I didn't always think before I acted," Sinapi said about his youth.

"I made mistakes, but you don't know about them," he said, contrasting the past with how now everything has the potential to appear in the "cyber-world."

He outlined steps students could take if they are being harassed online, mentioning everything from blocking the individuals to not reacting or telling them to stop.

Sinapi told the students that if it is threatening or serious they should notify their parents.