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WAYNESBURG – She was well spoken and perfectly poised, so it is hard to believe there was a time the woman crowned 2012 Miss Ohio would have ever felt “ugly, depressed and alone.”

But speaking Monday at Waynesburg Central High School, Elissa McCracken, 23, a senior at Ohio Northern University, said that was exactly how she felt as a middle school student in Central Greene School District. McCracken was at her alma mater to address the issue of cyberbullying, the topic she chose as her platform as Miss Ohio. McCracken’s shared experience helped to kick off the district’s Olweus Bullying Prevention Program at the high school.

Sharing a photograph of her younger self with the students, McCracken talked about what her life was like back then.

“I hated middle school. (The bullies) told me I was ugly and I was never going to be pretty enough to have a boyfriend,” McCracken said. “I was very shy and smart and made good grades, but I didn’t have a lot of friends. I wore glasses sometimes and my skin was breaking out and they teased me about that.”

McCracken began piano lessons at the age of six. When she joined the middle school band, piano wasn’t an option so she chose to play the clarinet.

“They bullied me for that, too. I guess I was a band geek, but I was a proud band geek,” she said.

During the two years McCracken found herself the target of bullying, instant messaging and Myspace were the trends for online communication, she said. She told the students this was the equivalent to their Twitter, Instagram and Facebook interactions today.

“I hope you are using it properly, using it politely and being kind,” McCracken told the students. “When I was being bullied I didn’t really know what to do.”

Her advice to the assembly was threefold. First, McCracken said never engage in a back-and-forth exchange with the person sending the messages. Next, she advised blocking their social media profile or cellphone number. Lastly, McCracken said students should tell a trusted adult that the abuse is taking place.

She said she “never, ever” responded to her tormentors. Instead, for two years she dealt with the abuse alone, crying in her room each night. McCracken said everything she did made her a target, from wearing a new outfit or getting a new hairstyle.

As an only child, she had no sibling to offer advice or comfort. Eventually, she turned to her mother, Dr. Helen McCracken, a middle school principal in a different school district at the time.

“I was mortified when she told me. I thought she was studying when she would stay in her room. Her grades proved it so I had no reason to think anything was happening,” she said. “She withstood it (the bullying) for as long as she could and then she came to me.”

Helen said her daughter gave her few details and begged her not to go to the school for fear of reprisal from the bullies, so she turned to a close friend and colleague, a guidance counselor.

“She got on the phone with Elissa several times and she got better having someone to talk to about it. We wanted to fix it. We had to be patient and give it a little time,” Helen said. She said they did not print any of the abusive cyberbullying messages her daughter received but now she suggests those who find themselves the object of bullying to save and print what is being said in the event school officials or police need to step in.

“We decided to get her away from the people we thought were doing it,” Helen said, and that was the beginning of Elissa McCracken’s journey to becoming Miss Rain Day 2008 and eventually, Miss Ohio.

The McCrackens began to involve their daughter in pageants, combining her love of piano and the theater. Helen said this introduced her daughter to some different people who were “mostly nice and kind people.”

During the assembly, McCracken shared the trailer for the 2012 documentary, “Bully,” depicting real-life stories of bullied kids, some who chose to end their lives out of desperation. She suggested the students find the movie and watch it for themselves.

“It is really heartbreaking but it happens. The problem is real. It is happening all over the country and all over the world,” she said. “Take care of yourself. Tell. If someone gets in trouble for it, they deserve every bit of it (the punishment). “Last year, I was on national television competing for Miss America. I did it (overcame bullying), so can you,” she said.

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