

## **Survivor's tale touches girls**

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ASHLAND — Anorexia and bulimia no longer are just clinical terms to girls at Paul G. Blazer High School.

By the end of the school day Thursday, virtually every female student at Blazer had met and listened to a woman who survived both afflictions and who now devotes her life to steering young women away from the influences that led to her own eating disorder.

"I thought I was the only one. I thought I was born flawed," said Shannon Cutts of Houston, Texas, who fought eating disorders for 15 years before recovering and launching a career as a singer-songwriter and motivational speaker. "If I had met one other person (with an eating disorder) it could have changed my life."

Cutts' appearance was arranged by Rebecca Jackson, a Blazer senior who is recovering herself from an eating disorder that seriously threatened her health.

"Shannon puts a lot of herself into the presentation. Teenagers are more likely to listen to someone who can share their experience," Jackson said.

The risk of eating disorders is serious enough that school officials let every girl at Blazer attend the presentation at the former American Electric Power building on Carter Avenue.

Cutts focused on media portrayals of beauty and the way movies, TV and magazine covers paint a weight-based ideal of femininity. "A lot of girls want to be thinner, but they don't know why," Cutts said. The answer is cultural conditioning through media messages, she explained.

Cutts showed statistics revealing the average 17-year-old girl sees 400 to 600 commercial messages per day. Researchers have found almost half of all girls want to lose weight because of magazine photos they've seen, even though only 29 percent are actually overweight, she said.

Those statistics weren't surprising, but what was more revealing — and helpful — was Cutts' own struggle with anorexia and bulimia, some students said.

"It was her personal story that touched us," said Lauren Clester, a junior.

"I'd never heard a person with anorexia or bulimia tell their story," said sophomore Amanda Buckland.

"Seeing her strength and how she overcame anorexia could give other girls strength," Clester said.

The negative body images that can lead to eating disorders are so pervasive that they can show up in elementary school, said Laura Slater, a counselor at Charles Russell Elementary who attended the presentation. "I've seen girls as young as fourth grade who think they're fat," Slater said.

Rebecca Jackson's parents said more schoolgirls, and their parents, need to learn about eating disorders.

When they learned their daughter was anorexic, it took day after day of frantic research for them to find resources, Greg Jackson said. "We grabbed for straws."

Most important, said Cindy Jackson, is educating parents and their daughters about the issue, and the difficulty and complexity of recovering from a disorder.

"It's like a dark hole and it takes forever to get out of it."

The key is to start early on educating children about media messages and the potential for distorting body images, she said.

Since his daughter has gone public with her ordeal, several people and schools have called asking for presentations, Greg Jackson said. Some at Blazer apparently attribute her activism to seeking publicity, Rebecca Jackson said. Others, she hopes, may find encouragement.

"If I can just help one person, it would be worth it," she said.

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