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# Orangeville students open up about racism experienced at Westside Secondary School

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While some people look back at their high school years fondly, others struggle to reach graduation as they face bullying, discrimination, isolation and an unsafe learning environment.

For two Black Grade 12 students at Westside Secondary School, Angel Powers and Makenna Thomas, the last four years of their education have been about survival.

The students say, particularly over the last three years, when remote learning brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic ended, the amount of race-driven bullying they were facing intensified.

Angel said she has been called racist names, such as monkey, and both she and Makenna have repeatedly been called the N-word by White students.

When Makenna was walking with her Black friend after class, she said another Westside student attempted to run them over, speeding towards them as they walked along a crosswalk.

?We pressed the button so it showed yellow lights flashing, which means we can walk, and the guy at first looked like he was slowing down, but then he sped up and tried to hit us,? Makenna said. ?He yelled the N-word out of his car as he sped away.?

Angel said, ?He's always doing that. He'll see us walk on the road and he'll just roll down the window and start yelling the N-word at us.?

Earlier in the day, that same student told their friend he was going to ?chain her up to the back of his car and drag the Black off of her.?

When the two students told their principal about the incident, they said they felt unheard and have not been made aware of any disciplinary actions taken against the student driving the car.

Angel and Makenna say the incident took place within view of a school security camera, but the principal wouldn't provide them with access to the footage to report to police.

Alicia Ralph, UGDSB's Human Rights, Equity and Accessibility Commissioner, said there were follow-up actions, but she couldn't specify them.

?Without getting into details, specific work was done with staff after the reporting of this incident, facilitated by the Equity and Inclusion team at the school. The incidents reported were promptly addressed through follow-up actions involving both school administration and a police report. Student discipline was also addressed.?

However, Angel and Makenna say nobody from Westside or the board followed up after they complained about the incident.

Angel said a majority of the racism she experiences at Westside comes from a select few students, and others who join in when they're making racist remarks.

Makenna, who is mixed race, is often told she's too Black to be White and too White to be Black.

?We're both fight different battles, but feel the same way because of our skin tone,? she explained.

Growing up in Toronto, Angel said she didn't face much racism. It wasn't until she moved to Orangeville over four years ago and began high school at Westside, that it became a problem.

?I was singled out because of my skin colour, the way that I styled my hair or from the way that I dressed,? Angel recalled of her Grade 9 experience.

However, the number of racist incidents faced by Angel and Makenna worsened the following year, as the pandemic subsided, remote learning ended, and students were in the classroom full-time.

?In Grade 10 second semester, when we went back to normal semesters, and we were in school all day for four periods, that's when I started to notice it more,? said Makenna. ?At first, I was very shocked. We were in 2022 at that time, so I was just like, ?Wow, this really has to continue?'?

Makenna said she used to bottle everything up but now feels numb and desensitized to racial discrimination.

She missed an entire semester of school in Grade 11 because of the racial bullying she faced at school.

Makenna began to self-harm because of the issues at school and tried to commit suicide through starvation.

?I wouldn't eat at all for those six months,? Makenna said. ?I would try to unalive myself.?

Angel said she would have panic attacks and vomit in the morning before school because of the racism she faced.

Growing up around in Toronto, surrounded by teachers and people who were also Black, Angel said she didn't see or hear much racism. But when she came to Orangeville and started high school, that all changed.

?It was really hard for me because I never experienced [racism] and I didn't know how to deal with it,? she said. ?It was hard on my parents too because they dealt with it growing up and then seeing their kids go through it ? it's hard for all of us to deal with.?

Angel added, ?I tried to just keep most of it to myself and tried to deal with it until it got to the point where it was messing with my mental health and I wasn't attending school. My grades got worse.?

Makenna's mother Patti Thomas, who's White, said she's frustrated by the Upper Grand School Board (UGDSB), for its failure to provide a safe learning environment to her mixed-race daughter and other racially diverse students.

?It makes me angry,? she said. ?It makes me upset, because when I've reached out to the school to have some support for my child, I get false promises. The principal would say one thing but would do another thing.?

This led Patti to look outside of the UGDSB for support, which she found with the advocacy group ? Parents of Black Children.

?They took on Makenna's case, and they have been supporting Makenna through the school board and through the system during everything that has been happening,? said Patti.

She told the Free Press that past principals and administrators at Westside have made promises to stop the racism occurring within the school, but she hasn't seen any changes.

The issue, she said, stems from a lack of discipline for the White students at Westside who are using the N-word and making racist remarks against Black students.

Ralph said the UGDSB does not ?dismiss or undermine any allegations of discrimination. Rather, we are fully committed to conducting comprehensive investigations into all allegations brought to our attention.?

?Such concerns are treated with the utmost seriousness, and as a board the UGDSB is deeply committed to upholding human rights while cultivating an environment where every student experiences learning in environments which are free from discrimination, foster a sense of belonging and affirmation of their identities,? she added.

After meeting with representatives from the UGDSB on April 19, 2023, about the racism Makenna faces, Patti was told by the board's executive superintendent that they are taking their allegations seriously, and in response, hired a third party to investigate.