



Community

Mobbing Like A 'Rape Of The Spirit'

By Nathan Johnson

nathan.johnson@yankton.net

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Maybe you've never heard of the term "mobbing." But chances are, you've experienced it in one way or another, according to an expert on the subject.

Gail Pursell Elliott, who is known as the "Dignity and Respect Lady," delivered a keynote address on mobbing Wednesday during the opening of the 11th annual Yankton Area Mental Wellness Conference. She has written several books on the subject, and offers training and consulting to educate people about it.

"It's something I had never heard of at all until 1997," Elliot told the audience assembled in Mount Marty College's Roncalli Building. "But I had seen it and didn't know what it was. All of you have seen it, but you didn't know what it was.

"Mobbing is where individuals gang up on somebody and force them into submission, or force them out of a work situation or some other environment through unjustified accusations, isolation, gossip, rumors, intimidation and humiliation," she continued. "Above all, it is engineered in such a way to make it look like the target deserves it. They are responsible for their fate."

The effects of mobbing can be so devastating to an individual that even trained professionals can mistake their symptoms as mental illness if they are not familiar with the phenomenon. Elliot read excerpts of a Current Psychiatry article written by a medical doctor in which he detailed his experience with a man who had been the target of mobbing in the workplace. After visiting with the man initially, the doctor was convinced he was paranoid, homicidal and suicidal, and was going to have him involuntarily committed to a hospital. However, further investigation revealed that the man's stories about his abusive work environment were true. The doctor encouraged him to find a new job, which the target did, and the symptoms eventually went away.

Elliot said mobbing can occur anywhere — workplaces, schools, churches, families, communities — and that it is an "organizational cancer." If it is allowed to happen in one area, it often spreads to other areas, she explained. In one instance, Elliot consulted with a county government where officials believed mobbing was happening in only one department. However, after her training sessions, reports of such behavior flooded in from employees in all areas of the organization.

"Mobbing is like a rape of the spirit. It destroys a person from the inside," Elliot said. "Before I found out about this, I used to wonder why someone would go into a work environment and spray the whole area with bullets. Why do people go postal? This is one reason why. You know who your friends are not, but you don't know who your friends are. Everybody is suspect. These people become so paranoid. They can suffer extreme anxiety disorders and also, in extreme cases, post-traumatic stress disorder."

It's easy for people to become caught up in mobbing an individual, Elliot said. They want to belong and don't want to become targets of abuse themselves. Elliot admitted that not only has she been the target of



(photo by Kelly Hertz/P&D) Gail Pursell Elliott (above) delivered a keynote address on the subject of mobbing Wednesday morning during the opening of the 11th annual Yankton Area Mental Wellness Conference. She has written several books on the subject, and offers training and consulting to educate people about it.

mobbing in the workplace, but she also engaged in the behavior herself on one occasion before she recognized that what she was doing was unacceptable and apologized.

"People think it's funny, and they think it doesn't have a lasting impact," Elliot said. "Mobbers make fun of people behind their back. They spread rumors that are unkind. They get other people to gang up on someone. They humiliate someone and act like it is a joke. They withhold information the person needs to make decisions. They hold their targets to a different standard than they do everybody else. It's engineered to confuse the target. It's engineered to discredit."

Elliot said her experience has often been that once people are educated about mobbing, they recognize it and become vigilant about preventing it.

Those who have experienced mobbing need a sympathetic ear, validation that what they have gone through is wrong and a recourse for justice. They need to be told in no uncertain terms that what they have experienced is not their fault, Elliot added.

Because there is often little legal recourse for severe mobbing cases in the workplace, she said legislation needs to be enacted to address it similar to sexual harassment laws.

"It seems a shame that we have to legislate civility," Elliot said, "but we do."

The simplest solution to the problem is to treat everyone with dignity and respect, she said — whether that person is your best friend, the person who flipped you off on the interstate or Osama bin Laden.

"Treating people with dignity and respect does not mean you're going to agree with everybody," Elliot continued. "It doesn't mean you're always going to be friends with everyone you meet. It does not mean you're going to tolerate reprehensible conduct. It does not mean there are not consequences for actions. What it does mean is, we remember who we are, take responsibility for our own behavior and, above all, separate people from their behavior. We can always honor the person while addressing the behavior. Behaviors can be changed."

To learn more about Elliot, visit her Web site, www.innovations-training.com.

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