



MASTERS Audio Club, January 2013 Dr. Susan Swearer

Dr. Susan Swearer is an expert on bullying prevention and intervention. With a longstanding record of helping schools reduce bullying behaviors, she has written extensively on the subject. She was invited to present at the White House Bullying Prevention Conference (2011) and the launch of Lady Gaga's Born This Way Foundation (2012). Interviewed by **Winn Claybaugh**, Dr. Swearer provides solid facts and statistics on bullying, plus initiatives we can all implement to become part of the solution.

- Winn: Hi everybody, Winn Claybaugh here. Welcome to what I think is going to be a pretty special issue of MASTERS. And I love being able to look outside the beauty industry. I know that our audience is much bigger than just the beauty industry, which I'm very thrilled about and grateful for, but I love being able to interview people who are not necessarily from the beauty industry because what we all need to grow is what is called unconventional wisdom. Conventional wisdom is what we already know; and what's going to help us go to the next level in our business, in our personal lives, in relationships, in our self-esteem is what we don't know. And to go to those experts outside of ourselves to bring in the best information is what today is all about. So I'm sitting here with Dr. Susan Swearer, who is a professor of School Psychology, Department of Educational Psychology, from the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. So, am I calling you doctor? Am I calling you Susie? What am I calling you, sweetheart?
- Sue: I think Sue is fine.
- Winn: Okay, I'll call you Sue. And we actually got to meet in person a couple of months ago.
- Sue: Yeah, August.
- Winn: Yeah, but prior to that it was an email exchange for a while. And then we graduated to actually speaking on the phone. And I'll just get right into it that your expertise is in anti-bullying initiatives. And I've seen you on TV a couple of times. It seems like when there's a hot topic about bullying, they tend to call you and say, "Can you come on the show and talk?" I saw you on *Anderson Cooper* and you've done several of those. It's nice to know that people find who is the best. In fact, Lady Gaga, when she launched her foundation, Born This Way Foundation, she had contacted you as well to kind of help navigate through all of that. Correct?
- Sue: Exactly.

Winn: And this is a pretty hot topic, you know? Nowadays in the news, it's a very hot topic. And I think it's cool to see that people are finally realizing that, wow, it is serious and we do need to stand up. But I did it this morning. I had an audience of about 300 people, all adults, so they weren't high school kids or grade school kids. All grown adults and I asked them, you know, "How many of you have ever been the victim of bullying?" And three-quarters of the room stood up.

Sue: Wow.

Winn: And so even if the bullying isn't happening in their lives today—although it does happen in the lives of grown adults—even if the bullying isn't happening today, there are still those scars. And I'm sure it changes the way they—changes their relationships, it changes their self-esteem, it changes how they communicate. And so I was just so, so grateful to have you here, Dr. Swearer, to educate us about this amazing, amazing topic because knowledge is power. And with power, we can do something.

Sue: Yes. Yes.

Winn: So welcome to MASTERS.

Sue: Thank you so much, Winn, for having me here. I'm thrilled.

Winn: So just because it's a fun story—certainly not all of you—and I'm going to get into your bio a little bit more, but Lady Gaga, how did that come about? And you were at the launch. They did the launch with Oprah and Lady Gaga at Harvard University.

Sue: Harvard, yep. So the launch was in February, end of February 2012, and it was at Harvard University. And so I had been contacted by the foundation months prior. They were interested in really knowing what was the research about, you know, what does the research show about bullying and victimization. And they wanted to make sure that her messaging was correct, that when she said something about bullying, that we actually had the research to support that. And I was really impressed with that because I'm not sure how many celebrity foundations actually really care, truly, about what the research shows. She's a very smart person. Her mother is a very smart person. So it's been really fun. I look at this as a translational research project. It's been really fun to try to get the research knowledge out there. Obviously her voice has such a huge reach, and it definitely has a bigger reach than my voice, so it's been really fun to be part of that and it was a thrill to be part of the launch.

Winn: Well, it's fun to work with celebrities because you and I are passionate about certain things but they can get done in five minutes what may take us, you know, months and months of trying to get somebody to listen to us. And they just open their mouth and they can get things done. So it is cool that she wants to be speaking the truth and factual rather than just—yeah, that's good.

Sue: And she asks for—when there's an issue that comes up—so right now she's doing this Body Revolution. And I don't know if you've read about that or seen

that, but she has, you know, come out and said that she's really struggled with bulimia and anorexia. And so we've put together—"we" meaning myself and my graduate students—have put together a ton of readings for her, as well as Born This Way Foundation has a research advisory board. And so they really have compiled some terrific educators in the United States and we're helping her, you know, kind of read through, you know, the research. Because with many issues, there are lots of books and things on the market that maybe aren't research-based but that kind of hit the popular market. And it's very important—you know, obviously I believe this because I'm an academic—but it's very important that what we get out there in the popular media is based, you know, on research and has a research basis. And that, to me, is critical. And so it's been really an honor to work with her foundation.

Winn: And I don't want to misrepresent them because they don't really call themselves an anti-bullying foundation.

Sue: Not at all. Right.

Winn: It's a youth-empowerment foundation. And so, yeah.

Sue: Exactly. So their foundation really is about how do we help youth, and really everybody, create a kinder and braver world. And then they have these three pillars: safety, skills, and opportunities. And so they're very much about a youth-empowerment focus and, you know, issues like eating disorders, or like bullying, like self-esteem are all issues that they will touch on. But the message is much broader.

Winn: Which I think is wonderful.

Sue: I do, too.

Winn: Yeah. Now you've written several books on the topic. *Target Bullying: Best Practices in Bullying Prevention and Intervention Project*. You have degrees everywhere. If I just do a bunch of BAs and MSs and PhDs and just add them everywhere, okay. But you were also invited as a presenter at the White House Bullying Prevention Conference in March of 2011. What was that like?

Sue: That was quite a thrill.

Winn: Was it actually at the White House?

Sue: It was actually at the White House in the East Room.

Winn: Oh my gosh. Wow.

Sue: Yeah. It was great. And actually just getting into the White House was a thrill in and of itself, too.

Winn: They let you in? So you somehow cleared security there? Geez.

Sue: I got through somehow. So yeah, it was really terrific. And you know, I think that's another thing that's been very impressive about people that have a national voice. So obviously President Obama and his wife Michelle have this incredible national platform, and they have brought, you know, much-needed

attention to this issue as well. That this is not just a local issue, you know. It's a national issue. It's a statewide issue. When I started studying bullying over 15 years ago, only 5 states had laws against bullying. And now, you know, 49 states have some type of an anti-bullying law or statute, just in 15 years. I mean, that has really changed.

Winn: So there's one state that doesn't have any laws against it?

Sue: Montana.

Winn: Why would that be?

Sue: Well, you know, Montana, I think, still doesn't have a speed limit, right?

Winn: Oh, maybe, okay.

Sue: It could be one of those states where, you know, you can do what you want in Montana. I'm sure Montana is lovely.

Winn: It actually is a beautiful place there. It's also noted that—we're recording this right now in October of 2012, and October is National Bullying Prevention Awareness Month.

Sue: Right.

Winn: Which is pretty cool. And you know, recently there's all kinds of different stories. There was that news broadcaster who had received—here she is, an adult, she's a professional, she's married, she has kids, she's successful, she's, you know, somebody. An anonymous email from a viewer telling her that basically, "You're a terrible role model because you're fat." And just her speaking out against that. There was the young kids on the bus who were taunting the old grandmother. And you and I had a dialogue about that because what was sad for you about that whole thing was that it was horrific what these little 13-year-old kids had done, but the backlash was they got death threats. Yeah, so like that's the answer?

Sue: Right.

Winn: Yeah, let's go after the 13-year-old kids.

Sue: I really think, I mean, one of the things that we need to do as a society is just have more compassion toward people. So whether, you know—so those kids—let's take the bus monitor example. They're 12- and 13-year-old kids. I'm hard-pressed to know of any 12- and 13-year-old who said or did something stupid—I mean, I know I did as a kid. You're just—you're developing, you're forming. So as you said, I mean, for me what was sad about that story was that they were suspended for a year. So they're at an alternative school for a full year. They and their families received death threats, just nasty messages. And what we need to do is say, "Look, let's teach you. Let's teach you how to be a nicer, kinder person. Let's give you the skills. Let's give you the tools. Let's talk about appropriate problem solving. Let's talk about how do you talk to your elders." I mean, let's teach the kids

versus condemning them, because they're not going to learn anything by that condemnation. And so that was part of the sad aspect, for me, of that story.

Winn: People listening to this right now, you might be thinking, "Well, I've never experienced bullying, I don't know anything about it, it hasn't touched me. It's not a real issue in my life." You might think the same thing about cancer. "Well, cancer hasn't touched my family, therefore I don't need to worry about it." Huh-uh. You know, whether it's cancer or whether it's bullying, whatever the cause or the issue is, it's global and we all have a global responsibility to address it.

Sue: Yeah.

Winn: And addressing it is just being aware. Being aware and educating ourselves. And that's what this is all about.

Sue: Exactly. And it may not have touched your life personally, but maybe, you know, if you're a young person and you're going to have kids, maybe it'll touch your kid's life. Or you're a grandparent, maybe it'll touch your grandchildren's lives. I get tons of emails and calls from grandparents and parents who are really struggling with what to do. And from schools, too. You know, really struggling. "What do we do about this issue?" And it has become so huge, so global, I think the laws and policies add another complicated layer onto this issue. Schools are really scrambling with, you know, "What do we do about this? And how do we respond appropriately?" Meanwhile, they're under all this pressure to have certain test scores, otherwise they're going to lose their funding. So it's a very interesting climate and I would say, I think, everybody's struggling with what to do. From a research perspective, we know some of the answers. It's actually getting that work out there at the ground level is what's hard.

Winn: So give us some facts. Educate us as if we know nothing, we haven't seen any of these news broadcasts. Educate us on what this is all about.

Sue: Sure. Well one thing that is really interesting is I always say bullying is very idiosyncratic across communities and across schools. Even in the community where I do the bulk of my research, you know, one school may have very different prevalence rates than another school. And that stands to reason: every school has a different principal, every school has different teachers. Schools are organizations, you know, they're human organizations. And so that interaction between the people and the school is going to be different from one school down the street from another school. The makeup of the kids is going to be different. We have this term that we call "school climate." I'm sure you have climate in your schools. You walk into a certain school, it has a good, warm, fuzzy feeling. And you walk into another school and it doesn't have that good, warm, fuzzy feeling. What are the factors that play into that? And so schools that have what we would call a "negative school climate" are schools where there is going to be higher levels of bullying, higher levels of aggressive behavior. We know in those kinds of schools, those kids have lower academic achievement. They're not as engaged, they're not as

connected in their school. So we know that bullying certainly creates an unhealthy dynamic within the school environment. And so because it has been linked to academic outcomes, because bullying's been linked to mental health issues—as you've mentioned—part of, I think, the attention that bullying is receiving is because people are framing this now as a public health problem. I've certainly framed it as a mental health problem in the literature. And it really behooves us—I mean, I would say we have to deal with this issue because it's creating a generation maybe somewhat immune to some of these verbal attacks or physical attacks, and we have to turn that around.

Winn: I love it. So I don't even know the questions to ask, to tell you the truth. That's how much of a student I need to become with all of this. I'm not even exactly sure how to navigate this interview.

Sue: Well, I think that illustrates, Winn, the complexity. This is such a complex issue that people try to boil down into—you and I have talked in the past about zero tolerance, right? So somebody is bullying is somebody else: kick them out of school. That was the example from the bus monitor story. And that is just—it's not even a Band-Aid. It's like half a Band-Aid. The problem is so much more complex than that. And so I think that that is where everybody struggles a lot. That this—bullying is a complex social behavior. There's an audience for these behaviors. I always say, when I'm talking to teachers and parents, "If the kids didn't get something out of it, why would they do it?" They engage in bullying and aggressive behavior. They see it all the time. You know, they see adults in their lives doing—you know, bullying others. I had a teacher once after a workshop who came up to me and she said, "I don't know how we're going to stop bullying among our students when the male superintendent sexually harasses all of us female teachers." And I said, "Well, you're right." I mean, that is, then, the complexity of this picture. If you have people in power in a school who are harassing teachers, or you have an unhealthy structure within the adults in the school, then there's no way we can expect that kids are going to be healthy; they're watching.

Winn: Well, that was one of the messages of that news broadcaster who went on air to respond to this anonymous email from the guy who says, "You're fat." And she says, "Listen, I'm a grown woman, I have thick skin." But how many parents are watching TV in front of their kids saying, 'Look at that fat news broadcaster,' and the kids now think it's okay to walk into school and say, "You're fat. You're ugly." You know, harass them or bully them because of their skin color or their size or their sexual orientation or whatever.

Sue: Part of the issue is that girls receive messages all the time about, you know, weight and their appearance. And, you know, we used to kind of have that phrase, "Sticks and stones will break your bones, but words will never hurt you." But the reality is, words are devastating, words are lasting, and words really do hurt. And if kids hear their parents saying disrespectful things like, "Oh, that newscaster is so overweight," then they hear that, "Oh, I can go to school and say the same thing." And so a lot of our work really is with parents

and helping parents be very cognizant of what are they saying, how are they acting as role models, you know, for their children.

Winn: So you were talking earlier about zero tolerance. You don't believe in zero tolerance. Explain that more.

Sue: Well, I wouldn't go so far to say I don't believe in zero tolerance.

Winn: You just say it doesn't work.

Sue: It doesn't work for bullying.

Winn: Got it.

Sue: And so certainly when—and again, I think this is also connected to part of the complexity—that some of bullying behavior can also be aggressive behavior. And in aggressive behavioral situations where it's dangerous, then obviously zero tolerance—that's how zero tolerance came about, was that we have these kinds bring guns to school or, you know, there's a safety issue, we can't have a dangerous criminal, you know, if you will, in the school system. However, then zero tolerance has been applied to everything. I'm sure you remember the story of the kindergartener who brought the butter knife to school to spread his butter on his little roll at lunch and got suspended. That's an example of zero tolerance being totally insane.

Winn: Got it.

Sue: You know, just—hopefully principals who should be, you know, thinking more broadly about these issues, to suspend a kindergartener for having a butter knife at school is ridiculous. So that example has been used around the country as an example of zero tolerance gone bad, you know, gone awry. I'm not saying that there's no place for zero tolerance, but in the majority of bullying situations, kids are either saying dumb things that they shouldn't say; they're in a peer group and everybody's egging them on. They need to be taught how to interact in a better way. Zero tolerance doesn't teach them anything. And that's the program that you mentioned, the Target Bullying Program, that we developed six years ago when a principal called me and said, you know, "Suspension and expulsion are—it's not working. Is there something we could do instead?" And so we designed a one-to-one intervention program working with these kids who are in trouble for bullying. And so a lot of times their parents can choose this program instead of suspension, or they can go through the program and then their three-day suspension is reduced to two days or one day. So it's still a consequence, if you will.

Winn: Now, what's that program about?

Sue: Right. So what we do is we do an assessment. So we're trying to understand: why are these kids doing this? I mean, I think that's an important question. So we assess depression, we assess anxiety, we assess self-esteem, we assess what we call cognitive distortions. So a lot of these kids have what we call "thinking errors" and so they don't perceive interactions with other kids in a

neutral way. So, for example, Winn, if you and I are walking down the hallway and you bump into me, if I have a hostile attributional bias, I think, "Winn pushed me on purpose," and then I'm probably more likely to pop you or push you back. But if I don't have that bias, I think, "Oh, Winn bumped into me." Or maybe I don't even think anything. So we have a measure that we use of these kids called the How I Think Questionnaire. And so we're trying to get at what are their cognitive distortions. So this assessment piece then gives us a picture of why are these kids bullying others. And then we have an educational piece where we watch a video about bullying, we go through a PowerPoint presentation about bullying. And it's very educative, it's not judgmental at all, and I think that's a really important piece of it as well: that the kids get, "Look, we're trying to help you become a better person and this is the mechanism that we're doing this." And then there—depending on the referral, so whether it's verbal bullying or physical bullying or what we call relational bullying or electronic cyberbullying, then we might do role plays or tailor the situation or the discussion or the therapy, if you will, based on the type of the referral. Then we generate a report, and then we have a meeting with the kid's guardian, the kid him- or herself, somebody from the school, teacher, counselor. And again, it's a very positive, solution-focused meeting with a message of, "We want to help you change your behavior. Your behavior is hurtful to others. Here are some alternatives, and at this point it's your choice. You know, you've been given some tools, and you can choose to do that or not." And the schools have always been good about saying, "And if you choose not to do that, you know, well then, here are the consequences."

Winn: Right, right.

Sue: "But we know you can make a better choice." And so for the majority of the kids who have gone through this program, it has helped them change their behavior. And again, it goes back to the point I always make that if kids don't bully, you know, if we don't have the kids who are doing the bullying, then we don't have the bullying.

Winn: Right.

Sue: And sometimes people get upset with me because they say, "Well, you know, you're not focused on the victim." And I say, "Well, I'm not *not* focused on the victim, it's that there would be no victims if we didn't have any bullies."

Winn: So you want to focus on the bullies?

Sue: So I want to focus on these kids. And we have lots of, you know, therapies and supports for kids who are victimized, and that's important. I'm certainly not saying that that's not important. But very few people work directly with the kids who are doing the bullying. And it just—this principal and I felt like—wow.

Winn: Other than zero tolerance, kick them out, send them death threats.

Sue: That's right, there's no kind of alternative. And so, you know, what you're—we're seeing more in the media as well as in the research literature is this idea of restorative justice, which, I think in the future, I would say in the next

- three years, we're going to see a lot more emphasis on restorative justice for these kids. And part of that is a therapy component, and so that's what I've been doing for the past six years is this therapy component: helping these kids learn the skills to, frankly, be a nicer person.
- Winn: I have a book for them.
- Sue: *[Laughs]* I think we could add your book. Yeah, we'll say, "Hey, be nice or else."
- Winn: And the "or else" is—is there a certain group that tends to be targeted more? I mean, I know obviously there is, so just kind of educate us on that, yeah.
- Sue: Yeah. Sure, I could talk to you guys about that. Again, what's interesting to me is that that is idiosyncratic by communities. So I did this project in rural Tennessee several years ago, and it was the smart kids who were bullied because in that community, it was not okay to be smart. So it's whatever the norm isn't, right? So in a community—and there's a wonderful researcher at UCLA, Sandra Graham, who studies ethnicity. And so she talks about bullying and ethnicity in context. So if I'm a white kid in a predominantly Hispanic school, I'm at risk for being bullied because I'm in the minority. And so it really is anything that is non-normative behavior within that community. So you could be in rural Kansas and, let's say, all the kids are in 4-H and you're not in 4-H. Well, you could be a target because you're the outlier. Or let's say you're a gay kid in rural—anywhere in America—you're a huge target. And that's what GLSEN and a lot of organizations have done some really awesome work helping kids who, you know, are marginalized in a lot of these communities. Let's say you're a Muslim kid after 9/11; tons of kids in the religious minority in this country were targeted. Sikh youth are targeted because of, you know, the turbans on their heads. So there's just tons of stories, but the picture, the overriding factor, is this idea of being not in the norm. Whatever the norm is, as defined by whatever your community is.
- Winn: Okay. How has cyberbullying added to all of this? Because it can be anonymous. And again, I've received some of those anonymous, you know, things where you have no idea who sent it. You stare at the email address and say, "Okay, is there a clue as to where this person is from?" And I'm a grown adult, too, but it still hurts my feelings, you know?
- Sue: Oh yeah. No, I've received some of those emails, too. You know, when I first started studying bullying, cyberbullying didn't exist. You know? We didn't have cell phones. This makes me sound like I'm ancient; I guess I am getting up there. But we didn't have cell phones. We didn't have email, we didn't have Facebook, social networking sites. That has changed the face of bullying because you can say things and you think you're anonymous, and you can be anonymous, but actually, technically you're not anonymous. So if the message or the content of whatever the electronic medium is, is aggressive or violence and then it goes into hate-crime realm or death-threat realm, then obviously when law enforcement gets involved, then that goes down a very different path.

And again, a lot of people have written about and talked about, you know, the issue with sexting in young kids. So kids take a picture of themselves and send it to somebody else, and then if you send it, well then you're distributing child pornography. And so state DAs have really gone after a lot of these kids. Again, this is kind of in the zero tolerance phase. You know, I knew a few people when I was a kid who had—in that day it was a Polaroid—you know, took a Polaroid and, you know, you could cut it up. It didn't go viral. And that's the thing that we have to really teach our youth and that, as a parent, I teach my daughters. This can go viral.

Winn: You put this out there and it stays out there forever.

Sue: Exactly. So one of the things I always say, not only to my kids but to the kids we work with in our clinic—if you're going to type something or write something, you need to be okay with it being a billboard.

Winn: Wow.

Sue: And that kind of gives them a visual, like, "Oh." You know, and I try to do that in my own life before I send an email.

Winn: Wait, that's not just a message for kids, there's—that's for all of us.

Sue: For all of us.

Winn: Exactly.

Sue: Yeah. Nothing's really private. Somehow we get this idea, you know, that guy in New York who sent the Tweets about—what was his name, Weiner, right? Remember that—

Winn: Right, right.

Sue: Whatever he was, a senator, he wasn't a senator but a representative. You think, "What grown adult doesn't realize that this is not private?"

Winn: I know, that one just baffled me.

Sue: That was just stunning. But there's a lot of examples of that where you think, "Okay, you're grown, well-educated adults and you don't really get that this is not private communication." But I think the proliferation of social networking and Twitter and email almost gives people a false sense of security that, "Oh, this is a private conversation."

Winn: You and I had a dialogue a while back about the connection between bullying and suicide, and how maybe there was some danger in lumping the two together because everybody would assume that somebody who's a victim of bullying would be a victim of suicide, and that all suicides are because of bullying or whatever. Anyway, so can you kind of—

Sue: Sure.

Winn: It was a very important conversation that you and I had.

Sue: Yeah, this is an important conversation. It's a very important issue because, for the parent or for family members and friends of a kid who has committed

suicide and who has been bullied, that is the reason. And so for a researcher to come in, or somebody else to come in and say, "Well, it's more complicated than that," you don't want to be disrespectful to the grief and the experiences that they are going through. But the reality is, if you look at the research, you know, suicide is one of the number-one—or I think it's number three—reasons why youth ages 16 to 24 pass away. And so—but not all kids who commit suicide are bullied. And certainly not all kids who are bullied commit suicide. And so the danger in the media is this oversimplification of the connection. The number-one predictor of committing suicide is depression. And so—I actually studied in grad school under one of the leading childhood depression experts, and he always called depression a hidden epidemic because if you're a teacher or you're a parent and you've got a quiet kid in your classroom, they're not the kid who's on your radar. You know, the kid who's on your radar is the kid who's acting out. And so a lot of times depression in youth goes unnoticed. So if you have a depressed youth who also gets picked on, then that youth is at great risk for thoughts of self-harm and/or attempting suicide. But the depression piece is the piece that has the stronger, you know, predictor. But we don't see the media saying, "Oh, you know, depression's the cause of suicide." And every time a kid who's bullied then commits suicide, the storyline in the media is, "It's a one-to-one correlation," and we know it's not. You know, and I empathize with the media. I mean, you've got your 30-second block, you know, to say what you're going to say. But it's really important to educate people about the signs and symptoms of depression because those often go missed and unnoticed. And in fact, this just recently has come back up in the media because of the case in British Columbia, Canada, of the young girl, Amanda Todd, who last week committed suicide and did a video—a 9-minute video—about all the cyberbullying that had happened to her. And so one of my colleagues in Canada wrote a really nice piece for the *Huffington Post Canada* about this very issue that, you know, the family's grief—and you can't—I mean, that's just terrible. I mean, you can't diminish that. At the same time, you know, bullying does not cause suicide. However, if you're in the room—let's say you had a family member who committed suicide and in your mind it's because of bullying, you know, this is a very difficult conversation to have. And so I very much empathize with these families, but the piece that I don't want to get lost is the depression piece. That depression, and knowing the signs and symptoms of depression, are so critical. I mean, we had a kid who came to our clinic and he clearly, you know, after our interview with him, was depressed and suffering from depression. But it was easier for the family to say, "Oh, we think our son has ADHD," and I was saying, "Well, I don't really think it's ADHD. It's depression." And a big part of it, then, is we treated it as depression and he got better. So I worry, just as my adviser had said, you know, that depression is a hidden epidemic in kids. One reason is because the predominant mood for depressed kids can be irritability. Well, when you say that to any parent of an adolescent, they're like, "Oh my gosh, they're all irritable!" So again, this is where the story is complicated.

Winn: I was reading some information that I came across—I think I even sent this to you. It says, to get an accurate gauge of the issue, 70% of teachers believe they effectively deal with bullies but students say only 25% really do.

Sue: Right. And that's pretty consistent in my research and other people's research, that, you know, teachers say, "Oh, we think we're pretty good at handling this." And the kids say, "Oh no—"

Winn: "You're clueless. You don't know what's going on."

Sue: "You're clueless." Right. And partly, too, there's a bit of a gap. And again, this really varies by schools. But for a lot of kids, they just feel like the teachers don't get them, they don't understand them, and so they're not going to talk to them. And so again, when I'm working with schools, I'm trying to identify who are those cool, trusted adults in the school that kids will talk to. And then let's set up mechanisms in those schools where kids know, "Oh, I can talk to Winn. I can talk to Mr. So-and-so, that they will listen." So when I talk to schools, I always talk about: train the staff, train all your staff, but then really target some training on those staff who just have God's natural gift to connect with kids. And then create systems in place where kids know, "This is who I can go and talk to."

Winn: Let's take this to the adult workplace. What do we need to know? What do we need to educate ourselves about?

Sue: I just read a statistic today that said that 25% of adults in the workplace have experienced some type of bullying behaviors. And so again, this is an issue, as the kid issue has received so much attention, now the adult issue is receiving a lot of attention.

Winn: But what does that look like?

Sue: That then—yeah, that then got a bit blurred with like harassment and intimidation, and so some states have laws that say bullying, harassment, and intimidation, but then those laws end at the age of 18. So actually you've got an adult workforce that's, in that regard, somewhat unprotected. So it'll be interesting to see from a policy-legal perspective how these policies may, you know, then do an upward extension toward the workplace. But the workplace, if you think about—there's an inherent power imbalance in many workplaces. You have a boss, and you have people who are under the boss. And if you have a benevolent boss, then you're not going to have a lot of workplace bullying. If you have a boss that's power hungry and, you know, maybe not the nicest person, then obviously that's a real risk factor for workplace bullying. And the worker is somewhat unprotected because, particularly in this economy, they need that paycheck. They really need that job. So yeah, so workplace bullying is certainly getting a lot more attention. And just like, you know, 20 years ago, 25 years ago, people in Norway and Sweden and the U.K. were studying bullying, and then the U.S. kind of caught up. Same thing. I mean, workplace bullying has been studied a lot in Australia and European

countries, and now more work is being done in the United States in this issue as well.

Winn: So what would workplace bullying look like? Because have you also noticed that now, because bullying, the term is—everybody says, “Well, I’m being bullied.”

SS Right, exactly. And I think that that is one of the dangers of all this attention on bullying, is that any mean behavior, then somebody says, “Oh, I’m being bullied.” No. Maybe someone’s just being a jerk, you know? I mean, there’s people who aren’t very nice, and whether it’s bullying or not, on some level—and this is a lot of the work I do with parents and schools—it becomes this almost semantic argument. And then what gets lost is, “Look, let’s just try to help these kids change their behavior,” you know? And in the workplace, again, that can look the same in terms of, you know, people always have a hard time differentiating teasing and bullying. You can be teased in the workplace, but when does it cross the line? When does it cross over into bullying? And certainly on some level, that’s on the perception of the person. If I feel that you’re bullying me, then I’m feeling vulnerable, I feel like I can’t defend myself, maybe you’re saying mean things. But then maybe in your mind, you’re thinking, “I’m just joking around.”

Winn: “I’m just having fun.”

Sue: “I’m just having fun.” And so, at the workplace level, a lot of what we talk about is working with human resources and how do you have—do you have somebody within the organization who could mediate? So who could sit down between two people and say, “You know, it sounds like you have a difference of opinion. You say your side, you say your side, and let’s try to figure out what’s going on and kind of make an agreement about how we’re going to treat, you know, each other here.” So a big part of, I think, what we’re seeing with workplace bullying is the importance of human resources and the importance of having, you know, maybe an employee-assistance program, having connections for people. Because obviously, if I feel that I’m being bullied by my boss, it’s risky for me to go to my boss and say, “I think you’re bullying me,” or whatever, because then you could fire me. So I think—when I work with employers, I say, “You want to have mechanisms in place that your employees know this is the process that I can go through to have somebody talk to.” And a lot of times people just want to get it out. It’s like cathartic, they want to talk about it. And then it’s not that big of a problem anymore because they’ve had somebody to talk to.

Winn: Does your research and the work that you do also translate into training companies on how to create a better work environment that is anti-bullying?

Sue: Yeah, you know, I haven’t. My work has really been focused at the school level and kind of the student world. But I’ve done a lot more work recently looking at schools. I mean, schools are organizations, they have a lot of kids in them, but you’ve got an adult workforce in the schools. And then also recently I did a very interesting workshop at a cereal factory. And a factory

has a very interesting dynamic where you have upper management, middle-level management, and then you have workers on the floor who are on the line. And, you know, in this situation it was a cereal packaging plant, and it was very interesting to learn about this company and how this company operates because a lot of the people on the line—one of the upper management people called it a mini U.N. because you had Sudanese, you had people from Mexico, you had all these people on the line who don't speak English. And then you have these middle-level managers who are in charge of, you know, all of these individuals. And the production line moves very, very quickly. So you could see lots of opportunities for workplace bullying, and they did have some pretty significant issues. So from an organizational perspective, I think it's really fascinating.

Winn: So I want to educate myself. What are the signs—if I'm a boss, if I'm a leader, if I'm in power in the workplace, what do I need to be looking for?

Sue: Right. Certainly I think you need to be looking—do your employees—are they happy? Are they smiling? I mean, do they show up to work on time? Do they do the extra stuff? You know, the employee who's unhappy and maybe who's being belittled or being bullied at work, you know, they may not show up on time. They may not, you know, show up at all. They may call in sick a lot. Very similar symptoms that we see with kids: school avoidance, headaches, stomachaches, you know, not wanting to be around people. And then obvious signs of, you know, crying. Clearly looking distressed and then not having somebody to talk to about that. So, really, happiness or lack thereof is a huge indicator.

Winn: Right. And what are some of the things that we can do that we can create—I mean, not everybody can afford an HR department. What are the resources so that we can start addressing this?

Sue: Well there's one free resource, which is, if everybody was nice and kind then this wouldn't happen, right? From the CEO of the company or the president or the boss, whoever is in charge, it starts with them. It starts with them, just like you say in your book, you know? It starts with them being nice and kind and setting the tone. Then watching. So again, depending on how the business is structured, if there's a middle-level management. I would do a lot of training with my middle-level managers about, you know, healthy interactions, healthy workplace interactions. How are they, again—they're leaders for the people who are under them. And then, you know, team-building things. I mean, having pride in where you work and wanting to come to work. You know, being, you know, grateful to be there and having that sense of gratitude. It starts at the top and then gets permeated throughout the company, versus a company that doesn't have that sense of gratitude or they live in fear of the CEO. Well, that's a breeding ground for intimidation and harassment and bullying.

Winn: I would think, because—do studies show that a lot of kids in grade school, high school that are bullies are somehow being abused at home or being bullied at home, so to speak?

Sue: Right. Some research does show that. Again, just like the being bullied-suicide connection, it's not a one-to-one correlation. But some research does show, and in fact, some of my research showed years ago that kids who reported bullying others at school reported being victimized at home by their siblings. So we've been doing a lot of work when we work with parents about sibling interactions. And when do parents leave their kids alone? They leave their kids home alone, they're working, they're trying to make ends meet. I get that. Certainly as a parent, I get that. But you've got to really watch those interactions between the siblings. And so a number of people now are really looking at sibling bullying.

Winn: Interesting.

Sue: Yeah. So they're very—there's a connection between an aggressive family dynamic and then learning those behaviors and then going to school. Now, not all kids who bully at school have that at home but it certainly is a risk factor, is what we would say.

Winn: And I'm sure you have stories, and if you have some that come to mind, I'd love for you to share them, but—I recently hooked you up with a good friend of mine whose little boy at a baseball game was told by another little boy he's going to go home, get a gun, and come back and kill him. And I don't want to get the facts wrong here, but basically the school didn't really address it properly. They didn't inform the parents, and then when they finally did, they said, "Oh, it's handled." Almost like, "Oh, don't worry about it," and it was almost like, "Boys will be boys." Do you hear that a lot?

Sue: Exactly, yes.

Winn: Like it's a rite of passage or something like that.

Sue: Well, in that example, boys will be boys, I hear that all the time. Or when girls are being nasty.

Winn: Mean girls. Mean girls.

Sue: Well, these are just mean girls, you know, they'll just grow out of it. And it's like, "No, they're not going to grow out of it without our help."

Winn: Right. They end up on *Real Housewives* of whatever city.

Sue: Exactly. They end up on a reality TV show. But I mean, I just feel that it's all of our adult society—everybody's responsibility to help shift this. We have got to change this somehow because there is a trajectory. We know that kids who are involved in bullying in elementary school, middle school, high school grow up and they actually have pretty bad trajectories, you know? They're not happy adults. And so, you know, as a society it's really important that we figure this out and we, you know, are able to say, "Okay, it's cool to be nice," you know? And that's some of what—that's a big part of what Lady Gaga's

foundation is trying to do. It's that, "Let's make it cool to be nice to everybody." And again, that goes back to what I was talking about, normative behaviors. If it's normative in a given school that you pick on other kids, well, then those people are going to be picked on. But then if it's uncool, if you were to pick on somebody, people would say, "Well, what are you doing?" And I have a great story from a group of elementary school kids. It was in rural Nebraska. And I was talking to them about, you know, bullying. And they said, "Well, this new kid came to our school and he was really kind of mean and he started picking on everybody at recess." And they said, "But then he stopped." And I said, "Oh, well what happened?" And they said, "Well we just told him we don't do that here." And I was like, well, there you go. Okay, 15 years of research done. And it's a very simple but true story. Like all the kids said, "We don't do that here." So at that point, that kid has a choice. "I can continue to bully and be an outcast, or I stop." So that's what I said earlier, that if there's no gain, right, if there's no kind of resource or gain for the bullying behavior, then why would you do it?

Winn: One of the things that I also read here said that there's power in numbers. I guess that's what you were just talking about, the story you were just telling. "Bullies back down when put on the spot by intervening bystanders." And it asks the question, "How can we encourage students to stand up for each other?"

Sue: Yeah. I love that story and I tell it a lot because it's very simple. You know, they just said, "Hey, we don't—this is not how we roll here. We just don't do that here." How do we empower kids, as well as adults, to do that? Because on a flip side, I had a bunch of teachers say to me, "The kid in our school who's the biggest bully is the son of the sheriff." Again, in a small town. And they said, "There's nothing we can do about it," because who in a small town in rural America has a lot of power? It's the sheriff. So we have lots of examples of power being abused. And so, in that case, that's a tricky thing to answer because in these rural communities where, you know, you can't really go anywhere. And the people with the power—if the people in power are abusing their power, you're kind of stuck, and it's scary.

Winn: What scares you the most about all of this? And by the way, we'll get into the hope. We'll get into the solutions and we'll—what scares you the most about all this?

Sue: Well, I think there's several things. One thing that I think is very scary is that now because bullying has become so popularized in the media—

Winn: You mean the stories about it?

Sue: The stories. And you know, there are a thousand programs to solve bullying, and schools are just inundated with programs and they're expensive, and schools don't have a lot of money. And so one of the things that scares me is that a lot of these programs don't have what we call an evidence base. They haven't been tested. So it would be—you know, if I had a disease and you said, "Hey, I like this medicine. Why don't you take it?" And I said, "Yeah,

sure, I'll take it." You know, I want to take a medicine that actually has research behind it that shows that it's effective. And so same thing with bullying, anti-bullying programs. There are only a handful that have what we call an evidence base. Yet there's—I'll just say hundreds—that are being marketed to schools, and so people have no guidance about what's going to work, what should I do. So that scares me. I think the other thing that scares me are the simple storylines, you know, the suicide-bullying link, the bullying at school: "Oh, there must be something going on at home." I mean, the reality is, human behavior is complex. There's not one simple cause. There's not one simple reason. And so our solutions that we throw at, you know, our schools and kids, like suspension or zero tolerance, are designed to be a simple solution, but it's a very complex social problem. And so we're missing the opportunity to really educate, teach, guide, you know, shape this generation of kids.

One of my good friends and colleagues has written a book called *Real Boys*. His name is Bill Pollack and he talks a lot about the shame-blame mentality that we have in this country. And I think that—and he talks about it in the context of boys, and working with boys and young men. But then I also think about it in the context of bullying, that we tend to blame the victim and we shame, you know, the bully. Or we shame the person who's being aggressive. And again, what we miss in that dynamic, then, is the idea of help. You know, helping kids navigate these complex social relationships. Helping parents who are struggling. You know, if you're working three jobs, you're trying to make ends meet, you're not going to be in the best of moods all the time. You know, so what supports do we have in place for families and kids? And schools are really struggling, in many communities, to provide education. And then also, classroom management is a huge issue. Teachers tell me all the time, you know, they've got these kids coming to class, you know, they haven't been to the dentist, they have teeth decay. How can they study and concentrate when their teeth hurt? You know, how can they study and concentrate when they're exhausted because they don't really have a bedtime because their parent or adult or whoever they live with works night shift? And then we, you know, worry about, or we wonder why bullying happens. Again, it's such a systemic, complex problem.

Winn: What are some of the resources that people can look to? Like, first of all, some of the organizations—you mentioned some organizations. What anti-bullying organizations are you familiar with that you feel are making a difference?

Sue: Great. That's a great question. And I guess that gets us to the hope piece, you know, that one of the benefits of bullying receiving so much attention is that there's now a lot out there. There are a lot of supports out there. The federal government has done a great job, and their website is www.stopbullying.gov. That's updated, has tons of resources, suggestions for parents. They have a nice map of the United States so you can go state-by-

state and see what are the state laws in my state? So the government has a terrific website.

A website that I've been involved with, www.education.com, has a special issue on bullying. It's called "Bullying at School and Online." And that has, again, tons of resources for parents and for educators.

I'm a co-director of the Bullying Research Network. Our mission is to get the research on bullying and victimization out there. So what I had talked about at the very beginning of translational research—and at our website we try to have, really, what cutting-edge research our members are doing. And that website is <http://brnet.unl.edu> and so that's a website that is more heavily research-based, but again with the function of getting that research out there to the public.

Winn: And so even on a local level, those are the best resources that you know of, like that parents could go to, or teachers, or that bosses could go to?

Sue: There's so many websites, and so I could also, Winn, give you a list, you know, that maybe in your—the flyer—you could put on there, too. But there's a workplacebullying.org website that has lots of resources for individuals who are struggling with workplace bullying. There's a great organization in Canada called Prevnet, and it's preventing and eliminating violence is their line. And it's prevnet.org, and so they have, again, tons of resources taking what do we know from the research and how do we, then, make that meaningful and apply it to parents and kids and teachers. The National Education Association, NEA, has a campaign, "Bully-Free, It Starts with Me." So if people go to the NEA website, they can find that information there. There's an organization—and actually, the NEA also has information for school bus drivers. You probably saw, and many of your listeners might have seen the movie *Bully* that came out this past March, and they have a website. They've partnered with an organization called Facing History, and they have a website with, again, tons of resources. So that's the positive. You know, the positive is that there are just a lot of resources for people to go to.

Earlier I mentioned GLSEN. GLSEN.org has a lot of resources about creating, you know, more inclusive and tolerant schools, and their materials are terrific. So there's a lot out there which, I think, gives me hope, you know, that people are really taking this issue seriously and putting out there materials that are going to help people.

Winn: Teach us what we can do. So I read that one thing—one of the—power in numbers—that intervening bystanders is a great solution that gets bullies to back down. Speaking up.

Sue: Yeah. Speaking up. Also, social support. So we know that when kids have supportive networks—and that network may not be at school. You know, the network may be in their church youth group, or their neighborhood friends, or whatever it is. So making sure—whenever I talk to parents, I always say, "Your kids need to be connected." You know, connected to the family. If

they're not connected to your family, who are they connected to? What are they connected to? What are they involved with? So the kids who really are disconnected and don't have involvement or support, those are the kids that we really need to worry about. So we can all look for that kid who maybe seems isolated or is isolated or nobody sits with him or her at the lunch table. How do we help schools kind of create these supportive networks? So, you know, have a lot of different activities so there's something a kid can get plugged into and get supported and involved with. What do we do to connect families? You know, families who are struggling, how do we help those families get connected and get some support?

So again, you know, I always talk about bullying as a complex social-ecological problem. Our solutions, then, also have to match that. You know, we have to understand that it's not just a school problem, it's not just a kid problem, it's not just a poor-parenting problem. You know, there's lots of factors that play into whether or not somebody is going to get involved in bullying or not.

Winn: As far as the solution, is that the same advice that you have for adults? I mean, your advice for intervening is to make sure that the kid is well connected in all kinds of different groups. Is that the same advice that you have for adults?

Sue: Sure. Yeah, again, we can all think about our own lives. We feel better if we have friends and we're engaged in fun activities and we enjoy going to work. You know, that kind of support is important. And then certainly for all of us as adults, and really all of us as humans, to live the life that we want to, have other people, you know—the old adage, treat others the way you want to be treated yourself. And so that's really important. I mean, if we all lived by the Golden Rule, then I always say I would then be out of a job, or I'd have to study something else because bullying wouldn't exist. So to me, it's always fascinating that actually the answer to stopping bullying is pretty simplistic, but the reality of making that happen is much more complicated.

Winn: Right. So if you were one-on-one or in front of an audience full of bullies, what would your message be?

Sue: Well, I would say, "Look around. The way you're treating people, is that how you want to be treated?" And when we ask kids that question who are doing the bullying, really, not one kid has said, "Yeah, you know, I want to be treated that way." And when we have parents—so you can imagine that some of the parents of these kids are a little rough as well. And we had an interaction with a parent who had been in prison. And I said to him, "Do you want your son to end up in prison like you were?" And he said, "Well, of course not." You know, I've never met a parent who said, "I want my kid to be just like me if I'm, you know, troubled." Or, "Yeah, I want my kid to be in trouble." No. What everybody wants for their children is to be happy and successful. And so those are the kinds of questions that I ask people who are doing the bullying. And invariably they're thinking, "Huh. No, I don't want to do

- this.” Now, does this happen with everybody? Of course not. Some people are just mean. You know, some people are kind of nasty. And then the message to them is, “If you continue down this path, you’re not going to be that successful. But at this point that’s the choice that you’re making. And so you can choose to be kind and nice, or you can choose to be mean. We know from research and experience that people who are mean and nasty aren’t that happy.”
- Winn: And if you were sitting one-on-one or an audience full of victims of bullying, whether they’re kids or high school kids or grown adults, what’s your message?
- Sue: I would help them try to see what are the supports that they have in their life and to help kind of empower them to say, “You can make the choice to be around people who are not nice or who are nice.” And then what are the ways that you could get away from somebody or be empowered to stand up to—you know, whether it’s bullying or harassment or intimidation? And then how can you get out of that environment?” In some cases, the reality is—you know, take a woman who’s in an abusive relationship or a man in an abusive relationship. How do you get out of that relationship? And what are the supports that that person needs to make the decision, “I’m not going to stay in this kind of relationship.” And so, you know, I think that that is a really important message to send to people who are being bullied is that, “You can get away. You can get out of that situation, and you can do it by finding supports, by finding people who can help you. You’re not helpless.”
- Winn: There’s hope.
- Sue: Yes.
- Winn: There’s resources.
- Sue: Yeah.
- Winn: Do you have a final message for our listeners?
- Sue: Well, I think my final message is that I’m super hopeful that this issue is getting so much attention that we actually—I see that we can turn the tide. I see that we are kind of on the cusp of being able to really turn this around. Like the past decade after Columbine, that’s where this issue got so much attention. And now we’re kind of at the phase of, “Okay, we know that this is a big issue. Now what are we going to do about it?” And so that’s where I see restorative justice practices and more sane practices coming into our schools and in our communities versus this kind of crazy zero tolerance that we know is ineffective. So I feel hopeful that we’re turning the tide and that we can create a generation of kids where this is not okay, you know, it’s not acceptable to treat other people this way. And then maybe they’ll train their parents. *[Laughs]*
- Winn: *[Laughs]* That’s right. Well, I mean, I have hope, probably because I met you and now I have a dialogue. You know, I think it’s people who stand on the outside of a crisis that feel hopeless, meaning they refuse to get involved,

they refuse to do something about it, they refuse to educate themselves about it, and they just continue, hopeless. But when you actually do something, pick up the phone, enroll in a course, call Dr. Swearer, do something. Raise money, raise awareness. All of a sudden hope is born out of the participation. And so I still feel, you know, quite ignorant to it but at least I now feel hopeful. So when I see the stories, you know, my heart is also going out to the bully. And that was a big step for me. So thank you.

Sue: Well, thank you, Winn.

Winn: Well, keep doing what you're doing.

Sue: Thanks.

Winn: Because I don't think this is going to go away anytime soon, but at least we're making progress.

Sue: Yeah, I definitely think we're making some good progress. So thanks for having me on. This is really terrific.

Winn: Thanks, sweetheart. Appreciate it.

Sue: Okay.