

Parents of Reena Virk to speak in Richmond next week

Presentation focuses on bullying and restorative justice

by Martin van den Hemel

Staff Reporter

Today is the 12th anniversary of the senseless slaying of Victoria bullying victim Reena Virk, but despite the unending anguish she feels, Virk's mother Suman is determined to make a difference.

Suman and Manjit Virk will be appearing at Richmond City Hall on Wednesday, Nov. 18, from 7 to 9 p.m. to speak about their daughter's murder and the topic of bullying in hopes of opening some eyes and helping to prevent a repeat in other communities.

"It's hard to believe all this time has passed by," she said, pausing for a breath and a long, deep swallow. "To this day, it's still difficult because it was such a senseless murder. We have moved forward and are doing something positive to help the community."

Suman said the healing process that followed her daughter's death has been helped along by these regular presentations she makes to youth, parents and community, to as far away as Grande Prairie, Alberta.

"We've been able to turn our tragedy into a learning...tool to help other youth at risk. I think that's given us a lot of satisfaction to be able to do that. And to channel our energies and time into something that's worthwhile."

The Virk's appearance in Richmond couldn't have been timed more perfectly, in light of last week's reported revenge-motivated attack by four victims against their bully. Four Vancouver youths claim they confronted a bully and brought him to Richmond, where they stripped him naked in a field beside the McDonald's on Alderbridge Way, assaulted him, repeatedly applied a stun gun to his head, and then tried to extort money from him.

Suman said she hadn't heard about the incident, but it underscores what can



Lisa Weighton photo

Manjit and Suman Virk receive the Anthony J. Hulme Award of Distinction from Solicitor General Kash Heed (right) earlier this month. The award honours the couple's extraordinary contribution to crime prevention after their daughter's murder in 1997.

result from anti-social behaviour where victim can become assailant.

Suman said Reena was the victim of a bully too, and she wishes a restorative justice program was in place when her daughter was still alive.

The criminal justice system isolates everyone and sends the wrong message to youth, such as not pleading guilty in hopes the Crown will eventually reduce the charge to a lesser offence, not offering an apology because of how that might impact a criminal or civil trial, and downplaying the seriousness of an incident in hopes of lightening the punishment.

"The bullies and the victims don't have a chance to really find out how the other one is feeling and what's motivating them for what they're doing. And I don't think there's any sort of real accountability because I know in the school system, if there's an act of bullying, what they'll do is take the bully and send him to another school...or the kid is expelled. What are they going to learn from that? They'll probably go home and play their video games or whatever. And even if they're

sent to a different school, it doesn't mean the child's behaviour is addressed. He doesn't get any counseling or help."

The root cause of the bullying behaviour aren't addressed in large part in most schools of the day when her daughter was murdered, she said.

The advent of restorative justice means counsellors, teachers, peers, family members, friends are involved in holding an attacker accountable for his or her actions. It provides a forum for the victim to share his feelings, and provides insight to victim and assailant.

The bullying of today is much different, Suman said, referring to new social media such as texting, tweeting, instant messaging and Facebook as forums for anti-social behaviour.

"The present system as it is isn't effective in mainly the issues that are at hand. Most people don't know what's going on with young people, and the pressures and issues that they are facing, and the fact that the bullying is a lot more sophisticated and a lot more deadly," she said.