

CPI *Unrestrained* Transcription

Episode 32: Ross Ellis

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Host: Terry Vittone

Terry: Hello, and welcome to *Unrestrained*, the CPI podcast series. This is your host, Terry Vittone, and today I'm joined by Ross Ellis, the founder and chief executive officer of STOMP Out Bullying™, as well as Love Our Children USASM. Hello and welcome, Ross.

Ross: Hi. Thank you so much for having me, Terry.

Terry: Thank you, Ross. Let me tell you a little bit about our guest. Ross Ellis is a national expert in violence against children, bullying and cyberbullying prevention, school violence, and Internet safety. She has over 20 years of experience in the nonprofit and corporate sector, and has been a child advocate for more than two decades. After a successful career in public relations and work in the field of child abuse prevention, she realized there was a critical need to protect our country's children from violence and neglect. So in 1999 Ross founded Love Our Children USASM, the national go-to prevention organization, fighting all forms of violence and neglect against children.

In 2003, she saw a growing interest in bullying and cyberbullying, and began researching the issue. In 2005, Ross created STOMP Out Bullying™, a national bullying and cyberbullying prevention nonprofit organization for kids and teens. STOMP Out Bullying™ has since become the most influential anti-bullying organization in the country, focusing on reducing and preventing bullying, cyberbullying, and other digital abuse; educating against homophobia, racism, and hatred; and deterring violence in schools online and in communities across the country.

Ross is a member of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child Council, and in 2013 she received the Longines Town & Country "Women Who Make a Difference for Children" award. In 2010, she was included as an *Architect of Change* on the program cover of the *Architects of Change* Conference, chaired by former First Lady of California Maria Shriver. She is named in *Marquis Who's Who of American Women*. Ross currently resides in Manhattan. All right, Ross. After that, are you ready to begin?

Ross: I don't know! (laughter) Thank you.

Terry: You're welcome. Now, after founding Love Our Children USASM in 1999, you recognized this critical need to address bullying and so, in 2005, as I said, you went on to found STOMP Out BullyingTM.

Ross: Right.

Terry: Talk about the genesis of Love Our Children USASM, and how that led you into STOMP Out BullyingTM, if you will.

Ross: Well, Love Our Children USASM was, and still is, to prevent child abuse, and really fight all forms of violence against children. You know, as an Internet safety expert, with all the predators out there, I really knew a lot about the Internet and was hearing rumblings, because cyberbullying really didn't exist then. You know, so it was the kind of thing where people were asking us, "Well, what about bullying? What about cyberbullying?" And I was hearing all the rumblings, and did my research, and learned very quickly. I had been bullied as a child, but you know, you don't wear it on your sleeve. You work it out; you get past it and move on.

So in 2003, I put all this information up on the Love Our Children USASM website, and in two days the website crashed because so many people were interested in learning about it. I was really shocked. We kept on putting more information up and decided it really needed its own dedicated area. So we named it STOMP Out BullyingTM to stomp out the issue, and thus, we're going to be 11 in October.

Terry: That's great.

Ross: Thank you.

Terry: And what are some of the main focuses of STOMP Out BullyingTM?

Ross: Well, you know, the whole thing is [about] being kind. You know, we wanted to teach kids and their peers and the schools that it's so important to get rid of the homophobia, the racism, the hatred. What's going on in this country today is mind-boggling. We want to educate kids on being kind to one another, being kind online. Realizing that anything like sexting is very likely going to get you in trouble and in jail possibly, and you may become a registered sex offender.

So it's really important to teach all-encompassed areas of this to kids all around the country, really educating [them] on how to respond to it, how to deal with it. You know, you never respond online. Teach them how to be empowered and deal with the bully. So that you're not ignoring it, but you are addressing it with the bully, in a way, as if "I don't care; say what you wanna say," and eventually they stop. So you know, it's just been incredible raising the awareness and educating them.

Terry: Raising the awareness of the gravity of the repercussions of this kind of behavior is important. And that leads into our next question. Can you tell our listeners a little bit about the annual Blue Shirt Day® that's coming up here in October?

Ross: Sure. Eight years ago we started Blue Shirt Day® World Day of Bullying Prevention™. And on the first Monday of every October, we ask everyone to go blue, in solidarity, and make that the day that bullying prevention is heard around the world. So whether they buy our limited-edition blue shirt or wear their own, we want them to go blue, because it's really the voice of the kids. If they take this day—and they do, they really look forward to it—if they take this day and show everyone, "This is for me. This is for us. We don't want this anymore," and a lot of kids don't, you know. It's sending a message to everyone, and it's been so popular that it's gone global.

Terry: That's excellent. You also have something that I find interesting, a really interesting concept that's about bullying. It's something called the NO MATTER™ campaign. Could you talk about that please?

Ross: Yeah. We're really excited about that. The campaign is not quite finished yet, but on our website we have a page where you can see every single kind of kid from every walk of life. And I think that really does send a message, because, you know, we say "no" to the victimization; we say "no" to the hate and intolerance of others. But we say "yes" to choosing kindness, and "yes" to teaching empathy. "Yes" to accepting others no matter, because it doesn't matter what you look like, your race, your beliefs, your sexual orientation, your gender. We need to be responsible and accept others' similarities and differences.

Terry: Right. You know, I was taken with more important work that STOMP Out Bullying™ is doing when I looked at the site. Right on your landing page, you've got something called the 24/7 Helpline for youths who've been bullied, cyberbullied, and are at risk for suicide. And I understand this line has been very effective. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Ross: We're really excited about this. We started this in late 2011 on a shoestring. And everyone said, "Oh, you need to call line." [But] the kids don't want to use their phones. So we made it a HelpChat Line. And kids who were bullied, cyberbullied, or at risk for suicide can log on and chat with a trained volunteer counselor. I'm so shocked, but happy, that it's been so successful. To date, I mean, gosh, we've helped over five million kids resolve bullying situations. But on the HelpChat Line, we've assisted over 55,000, and we've saved over 1,000 lives, and those numbers increase daily.

Terry: Those totals truly spell out an impact, don't they? So if I'm a teen, all I really need to know is to go to www.stompoutbullying.org, and I can get on that HelpChat Line and get the support—

Ross: Correct.

Terry: —that I'm looking for.

Ross: Correct, and you know, no child is turned away. I mean they do have to be 13 because of COPA laws, but any child under 13 can email us or call us, and we will respond and help them.

Terry: On your site you also include a page dedicated to National Bullying Prevention Awareness Month, and it's kind of cool how you've got it broken down into weeks and how schools can structure activities, and have each one of these weeks have a particular focus. And I think it would be interesting for our listeners to hear about that.

Ross: Well, we decided to break it down into weeks so schools wouldn't be bombarded with everything, because it is a whole month, and we want them to really be aware that it's important to focus on this. I mean, granted, they have to focus on their education, but it's important to focus on this during the month of October so the kids really have the activities, they understand them, they have the education about it, and they're aware.

So for instance the first week, Monday October 3rd is Blue Shirt Day® World Day of Bullying Prevention™. The week of October 10th, we want kids to make friends with someone you don't know at school. I mean, imagine that you don't know someone or there's someone new at school who has come in, doesn't know a soul, and feels very isolated. How wonderful if someone, a kid from the school, would say, "Hey, come on and have lunch with us," or "Join us at recess," or you know, be a leader. Take action and don't leave anyone isolated.

The following week is Stand Up for Others week. If you see someone being bullied, don't just stand there and do nothing, because then you're part of the problem. But if you're an upstander, and you're a leader, and you help the victim to get away from the bully, and even if you feel safe enough to say to the bully, "Stop, don't do this," you're being part of the solution, you know? So that's so important.

And then the last week, students can really participate by creating anti-bullying videos and sharing them on our site, creating positive messages with Post-Its and putting them on kids' lockers, [and] creating acts of kindness. That's just so critical. Imagine if every kid did one act of kindness, and paid it forward. I think that would be amazing.

Terry: I agree. And I think it's empowering to say, "Kids, make friends with someone you don't know." All of a sudden, instead of that maybe being perceived in a way as being uncool, you've sort of given permission to step outside of, you know, maybe a social role and to reach out to someone who is new at the school or who is isolated. And so this suddenly takes on an acceptability. And I really like that there's a discussion about it, and I think that it's got to really empower kids to do that.

Ross: Really, it's so important. And I think when kids do it, others will follow.

Terry: That's right. And also, I think it's exciting that you're encouraging kids to make their own videos and to post them. I know that you guys have some bullying prevention partners that are on your site. Could you talk about some of those? I mean they're going to be in a pretty heady peer group, you might say, if they get their video up there [on your site].

Ross: We're very fortunate. I mean Bon-Ton Stores, they're the sponsor of the Blue Shirt. Then we have Disney, and we have ESPN, who—ESPN and Hollister have sponsored the HelpChat Line. iHeartMedia, New York Jets, we have an amazing sponsorship with them. We're going to be doing our first symposium with them to educators.

Pilot Pen, amazing sponsor, they want to erase the bullying with their FriXion pen, and we're working on—I know it sounds funny, but it's a great product. Kids need pens when they go to school. Now, it's back to school, and what better message—

Terry: I like the tie-in; it's brilliant.

Ross: Right? What better message than to erase the bullying? You know, Planet Fitness, Judgement Free Generation™. We work with them and with the Boys & Girls Club to create a program so that the Boys & Girls Club staff throughout the country are able to help their members and really make a difference, and make sure that there's no bullying within the clubs.

Terry: You also have something called "Teen Ambassadors" that teens can become through your site.

Ross: Right, right. I mean it's interesting because I speak at a lot of schools, and a lot of companies, and all over the country. But it occurred to me a long time ago that kids—as much knowledge as I have, kids don't want to hear from me. They want to hear from their peers. So we decided to create a teen ambassador program, where they don't necessarily have to be bullied. In fact, it's probably better that they aren't or weren't, but they do have to be leaders, maybe school leaders in the debate club or president of the school or whatever, and kids that can really speak up about the situation and help kids who are going through this, and inspire them, and give them help and resources and things like that.

So our teen ambassadors go to schools. They speak to their peers. They've been on TV. One of them spoke to a town council where he got a standing ovation. It was amazing. One of them spoke at the Black Congressional Caucus Foundation in D.C. Our kids, they're really just wonderful. I adore them.

Terry: It sounds like you've got really a lot of momentum going at STOMP Out Bullying™.

Ross: We do.

Terry: That is a truly important work. And so who inspired you to do this outstanding work that you're accomplishing through STOMP Out Bullying™?

Ross: Gosh, probably from a very young age, my grandmother. I've always been a champion for the underdog, and my grandmother taught me about philanthropy. And then having worked in the corporate world for so many years, and owning my own businesses, was something I enjoyed. But I'm so passionate about helping kids, and selling real estate for Halstead Property, where I donate much of my own commissions back to the charity. So it's full circle. It's just something I love. You know, every job or business I've ever had, I've really enjoyed it. But this is something that I can go to sleep every night and feel really good [about].

Terry: Did you want to tell people where they might find out more about it?

Ross: Sure, thank you. It's STOMP Out Bullying™; the web address is www.stompoutbullying.org. We've got tons of resources. You'll see the HelpChat Line there, our campaigns. And we have an Educator's Bullying Prevention Tool Kit that can be purchased, and it's got loads of information for the educator so that they can really develop this within the school, and teach the empathy and the social-emotional learning which is so critical in any classroom. There's just tons of information there. Then we have—I'm just trying to think of all the things we have.

You know, be an upstander; that's so important to learn about being an upstander. If kids don't do that, then they . . . as I said before, they're part of the problem. We want them to be part of the solution. Schools who want to participate in Blue Shirt Day® World Day of Bullying Prevention™ can even sign up on our website. It's under Campaigns. And once they sign up, we will put their name, the school name, on our website, and it shows that they're part of our mission, and part of what we do. And I just love that schools—we have so many schools, even out of the country, that participate, and it's really exciting.

Terry: So you guys offer a lot! You have online assistance through the chat line. You do school visits. You do social media campaigns, public awareness, peer mentoring, just a whole host of activities and programs that STOMP Out Bullying™ provides.

Ross: We're busy, but we love it.

Terry: That's right. And we really thank you for taking this time to speak with CPI today.

Ross: Oh, my pleasure, my absolute pleasure.

Terry: Well, my guest today has been Ross Ellis. She is the CEO and founder of STOMP Out Bullying™. Thank you so much, Ross.

Ross: Thank you.