Inside People: When cheers turn to jeers

by Jane Clifford

Kim Whitney is volunteering this year as the WeCare representative for La Jolla Country Day, an upscale private school in San Diego where her daughter is a student.

CHEERS AND JEERS - When cheers turn to jeers it's up to parents to step in. CNS Illustration by Jacie Landeros The group grew out of the concerns of parents and school personnel from seven private schools who want "to promote integrity, responsibility, ethical behavior and wellness in our school communities through ongoing collaboration and education."

So Whitney was surprised to read a recent story in the Union-Tribune's sports section about a few Country Day students who held up negative signs during a basketball game against another private academy, The Bishop's School.

"The schools have had a friendly rivalry for years," Whitney says, recalling her daughter's recent volleyball game where she was "laughing on the sidelines with Bishop's parents."

Some Bishop's fans behaved similarly, according to spectators who were at the game.

"I don't like that kind of behavior," Whitney says. "I'm not a highly competitive person. I'm not looking for scholarships. I'm looking to keep my kids out of trouble.

"If (parents) witness their kids being abusive, they should grab them by the ear and tell them to knock it off."

Whitney says her family is "very, very happy" at Country Day but is equally disturbed by a problem that is common across the United States.

She expects the incident to come up at the next WeCare meeting.

Ann Carmel, the WeCare rep at Bishop's, says, "I would be extraordinarily distressed and embarrassed and I would feel like I failed my family and my son" if he had been among those holding up a harassing sign or demonstrating other unsportsmanlike conduct. But I also think the failure is bigger. Maybe we have to stop and say, 'Should we be playing a basketball game with a crowd that won't behave?' "

Carmel knows there's no quick answer to that question, so she did what she could, distributing fliers on Bishop's campus to let people know about the WeCare program.

That's exactly the kind of response Catherine Butler wants to see in response to this incident.

"Rivalry becomes part of a school culture," the La Mesa, Calif., marriage and family therapist says. "When it's fun and properly competitive that's fine, but when it becomes insulting and derogatory, that's another thing."

She chalks this all up to the increasing competitiveness among students living pressure-cooker lives to get in the right school, play on the right team, star in the right role in the school play, get invited to the right parties.

And she asks parents to consider what part they might play in their children's pursuit of perfection.

"If you're not happy with them, look at the source," she says. "Is it your own impossible standards and unachievable goals?"

She says she's seen six high school students over the last two weeks who are "worried about college, scholarships, school, sports." They can develop the same debilitating thing she calls "seventh-grade syndrome."

"Seventh-grade girls all feel bad about themselves and the only way to feel better is to go after other girls. It's a culture of criticism that basically says, 'Even if I'm not perfect, I'm going to make you feel bad.' "

That can manifest among teenagers - and adults - who think heckling and harassment are to be expected as part of life. Her response to that is: Get a clue.

"When you go to a game and there is harassment and verbal assault coming from the sidelines, that's not appropriate," Butler says. "I don't want people to confuse positive encouragement and enthusiasm with obnoxious behavior and inappropriate comments. It teaches everybody that that's OK. And it's not."

If you're a parent and you don't like the all-too-common negative and rude behavior at sporting events or in other areas of your family's life, get involved, Butler urges.

"If you see a problem and you haven't done something about it, you're giving tacit approval," Butler reminds us. "And you can't be surprised if this learned behavior becomes the norm. Later on in life, that aggressive behavior could look very different."