

'It's never OK'

Victim takes anti-bullying message to kids

BENTLEY— Gabrielle Ford was only 13 when her gait turned into a limp and her speech began to slow.

At school, she was teased, tripped in the hallways and even struck.

That's why today, the 24-year-old youth motivational speaker, who battles Fredrieich's ataxia — a rare neuromuscular disease — travels to schools to send one clear message: No bullying.

Barhitte Elementary students got a visit Feb. 25 from Ford and her black and tan coon hound Izzy, who also suffers from a muscular disease.

"Kids started noticing something was different, and Gabe feels it's OK to be different," said her mother, Rhonda Hillman.

"It's never OK to make fun of somebody.

"She really has an effect on kids. She's still young enough to reach them.

"She talks from her heart, which really makes the difference. I guess she feels she's found her meaning and purpose in life," Hillman said.



Staff photos • Jane

▲ Gabrielle Ford, 24, of Fenton talks to students at Barhitte Elementary School in Burton about the damage caused by bullying. Ford was diagnosed with a muscular disease at age 13, which affected her ability to walk. She soon became a target of school bullies. She and her coon hound, Izzy, who also has a muscular disease, have appeared on Animal Planet. Her new mission is to speak to students about bullying and share her own experiences with it.



▲ Ford receives a hug from a Barhitte student.



▲ Second-graders (from left) Andrew Pate, Nicholas Bessey, Brittany Fuhst, Maka Roster and Rebecca Yenson listen as Ford talks about the damage caused by bullying.