

Cyberbullying

The stakes have never been higher for students—or schools.

BY JENNIFER HOLLADAY

Phoebe Prince is loved by her peers. At least, now she is.

Hundreds of people have lent their voices to support her on Facebook. Taylor Gosselin wrote, "Your story touched my heart." Dori Fitzgerald Acevedo added, "I am so glad we are not letting this get swept under the carpet."

"This" is what some might call bullicide—suicide by bullying.

Before Phoebe Prince hanged herself, she was a new student at South Hadley High School in South Hadley, Massachusetts. Phoebe was a newly arrived Irish immigrant, but that doesn't seem to be what ignited the ire of her peers—or her own self-doubt. Instead, Phoebe reportedly dared to date boys whom others thought should be off limits to her.

Girls at Phoebe's school reportedly called her an "Irish slut," a "whore" and a "bitch," viciously harassing her in person and on Facebook. Public documents indicate that at least one student gloated after Phoebe took her own life, "I don't care that she's dead."

Phoebe's tormentors have since been dubbed the "Mean Girls," after the clique in the 2004 Tina Fey-scripted movie of the same name. And for the Mean Girls of South Hadley, the consequences of their purported actions have been severe. They are now maligned across the Internet, from

postings on Facebook to the comment areas of news websites worldwide.

The Mean Girls, along with two male students, also face an array of criminal charges for allegedly bullying Phoebe Prince. Since then, it's become clear that Phoebe's reasons for taking her own life were complicated. She had struggled with depression and had even attempted suicide once before. But the bullying she endured definitely had an impact on her.

New Term, Old Concept

Cyberbullying. The word didn't even exist a decade ago, yet the problem is pervasive in children's lives today.

Simply put, cyberbullying is the repeated use of technology to harass, humiliate or threaten. When fingers take to the keyboard, or thumbs type into a cell phone and craft messages of hate or malice about a specific person, cyberbullying is emerging. And unlike most types of traditional bullying, it comes with a wide audience.

"You can pass around a note to classmates making fun of a peer, and it stays in the room," said Sheri Bauman, a 30-year education veteran who now works as director of the school counseling master's degree program at the University of Arizona. "But when you post that same note online, thousands can see it. The whole world becomes witness and is invited to participate."

Anywhere from one-third to one-half of youths have

ILLUSTRATION BY SHANNON BRADY

been targeted by cyberbullies. And those experiences produce damaging consequences—everything from a decline in academic performance to thoughts about suicide.

“Our study of upwards of 2,000 middle school students revealed that cyberbullying victims were nearly twice as likely to attempt suicide compared to students not targeted with online abuse,” said Sameer Hinduja, the study co-author, who is also an associate professor at Florida Atlantic University and a founder of the Cyberbullying Research Center. “Cyberbullying clearly heightens instability and hopelessness in adolescents’ minds.”

Findings like these, and actual deaths like Phoebe’s, lend a sense of urgency to anti-cyberbullying efforts. Legally speaking, those efforts can be tricky for school administrators. The judiciary has long struggled to balance freedom of speech against the darker side of digital communication.

More and more though, courts and law enforcement are sending the message that cyberbullying will not be tolerated. For instance, in March 2010, California’s Second Appellate District concluded that online threats against a student were not protected speech and allowed a civil lawsuit against the alleged perpetrators, their parents and school officials to proceed.

The notion that schools must respond to behavior that takes place off-campus and online may seem like a tall order. But schools are coming to understand that bullies don’t just attack in the cafeteria or on the playground. “Wherever kids go with their computers or phones, which is nearly everywhere, the bullies come with them,” explained Bauman.

A 2010 study by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation

found that technology access among children has skyrocketed since 1999. Today, 93 percent of children ages 8 to 18 have computers at home, 66 percent have personal cell phones (on which they are more likely to text than talk), and 76 percent own another multimedia device, such as an iPod.

These tools give them access to a dizzying array of social media. Some of them, such as Twitter and Facebook, are well known among parents and teachers. But others, such as Formspring, fly well below the radar of most adults. Yet it’s sites like Formspring that can create the biggest headaches. Formspring offers its users total anonymity. That makes it at once a huge draw for curious teenagers and a nearly perfect medium for cyberbullies.

Relieving the Drama

The ostensible boundary between off-campus behavior and school life evaporated for Highline Academy, a K-8 charter in Denver, last spring when a conflict fueled by Facebook posts ultimately led to a physical altercation in the middle school. *(Editor’s Note: The author sits on Highline’s board of directors.)*

“When I looked at the pages, I was shocked by how freely and harshly the kids were talking to and about one another,” said principal Gregg Gonzales.

In the wake of the incident, Highline officials spoke with students in morning meetings and issued a special packet of information to parents and guardians about cyberbullying and Internet safety. Still, a new Facebook page soon appeared, with a growing stream of posts about a student directly involved in the altercation.

“As a community, we needed to step back from the incident and relieve some of the drama,” Gonzales said. He asked every parent in the middle school to support a 48-hour moratorium on Facebook activity at home. He also asked parents to discuss the use of the social networking site with their children.

Gonzales and his colleagues also placed personal phone calls to parents of students who had engaged in the online conversations. “It may be outside our jurisdiction to dictate what students do on their own time, but it was important to let parents know we’d discovered their child had engaged in cyberbullying or inappropriate conversations about the incident,” Gonzales said.

As it turned out, his initial shock about students’ online behavior was shared. “Numerous parents came back to us and said, ‘I had no idea’—no idea

Is Cyberbullying Largely a Problem for Girls?

Conventional wisdom suggests that boys are more likely to bully in person and girls are more likely to bully online. Sheri Bauman, the director of the school counseling master’s degree program at the University of Arizona, cautions against jumping to conclusions. “Cyberbullying is a new area of inquiry, and it’s just hard to draw definitive conclusions from the research that’s currently available,” she said.

What is clear is that cyberbullying, like traditional bullying, is about power. “Students attempt to gain social status through cyberbullying,” said Bauman. Sameer Hinduja of the Cyberbullying Research Center says that gaining social status often means tearing someone else down, and boys and girls often do that differently.

“Girls tend to target each other with labels that carry particular meanings for them,” said Hinduja. Labels like “slut,” “whore” and “bitch”—the epithets reportedly used against Phoebe Prince—are common within girl-to-girl cyberbullying. The main tactic of boy cyberbullies who attack other boys is to accuse them of being gay. “The amount of abuse boys encounter because of real or perceived sexual orientation is pronounced,” Bauman said.

what their child was doing online, or even that they had a Facebook page."

Such responses are typical. A 2009 study from Common Sense Media found that parents nationally underestimate children's use of social networking sites and often are unaware of *how* they are used. Thirty-seven percent of students, for example, admitted they'd made fun of a peer online, but only 18 percent of parents thought their child would engage in such conduct.

"The episode taught us—teachers, parents and students—that practicing respect, one of our core values, means practicing it wherever we are, at school or online," Gonzales said.

Getting in Front of the Problems

The Seattle Public School District took a proactive stance last year when it launched a pilot curriculum to prevent cyberbullying in its junior high and middle schools.

Mike Donlin, the senior program consultant who led the curriculum's development, says the district chose to create its own resources rather than use off-the-shelf products. This ensured that the resources would be easy to use and easy to integrate into existing curricula. "There also was the issue of cost," he said. "We believed we could create something great with far less expense."

Unlike many programs that address cyberbullying piecemeal—focusing only on Internet safety skills, for example—the Seattle curriculum attacked the entire problem. It did this by using the four most promising prevention practices. They are:

- Debunking misperceptions about digital behavior;
- Building empathy and understanding;
- Teaching online safety skills;
- Equipping young people with strategies to reject digital abuse in their lives.

The Seattle curriculum also recognizes the importance of parental engagement by offering take-home letters and activities.

Academically, the curriculum focuses on writing. This not only boosts student skills in a tested area, it also allows the program to discard common, ineffective practices. Instead of asking students to sign a pre-crafted pledge, for example, the curriculum prompts children to write personal contracts for themselves about their online behavior.

The curriculum also educates teachers about cyberbullying and introduces a language they can share with their students. "We couch lessons in a way that resonates for teachers, too," said Donlin. "So, we use the Golden Rule. We use the old-fashioned mantra 'don't kiss and tell' to address sexting."

Still, some information requires repeated explanation. Some might wonder, for example, why the curriculum prompts students to try to see things from the *bully's* perspective. "A single student can be a victim, a bystander and a bully in different moments," Donlin explained. "Maybe a

child was bullied at school this morning, but gets online later and bullies back. Their roles shift. Technology gives them tremendous freedom and power to reach out and touch in nearly every moment, for good or evil."

Learning how to resist the urge to bully back is important for many students, as is un-learning some common myths about being online. Kids often think they can be anonymous on the

DISCIPLINING BULLIES

Not As Easy (or Effective) As It Sounds

Advocates have spent years trying to get schools to take cyberbullying and its traditional counterpart seriously. It's no wonder then that so many express support for increasingly harsh consequences being handed out across the country.

When a prosecutor charged nine students with criminal offenses related to bullying Phoebe Prince, Elizabeth Englander, director of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center, called it a "watershed" moment. Across the country, in Seattle, after more than 20 students were suspended for taunting a classmate online, Mike Donlin, a senior consultant in the district, called it "a clear message—hard and fast." Many states and districts mandate required punishments like suspension or expulsion, and some are now considering heftier use of criminal penalties as well.

Sheri Bauman, the director of the school counseling master's degree program at the University of Arizona, encourages everyone to take a deep breath.

"Pushing children out of school isn't going to help," she said. "Bullying, online and in person, is rarely solved with punitive methods. Children who are punished typically persist; they just change their methods."

Bauman, who has studied cyberbullying and its traditional counterpart in the United States, Australia, Canada, Germany and Norway, points to different models of justices. She prefers the "Method of Shared Concern," which involves all parties—the bully, the victim and the bystanders—in examining and addressing conflicts. However, this needs to be done by educators who have been properly trained or it can make the situation worse (see *Recommended Resources*, p. 46).

"We need to expand our toolbox," Bauman said. "Punishments may make us feel better or safer, but other options can yield actual results."

Internet, or that what they do there is fleeting. Both ideas are mistaken. The Library of Congress, for example, is archiving all Twitter messages sent from March 2006 forward. Even the "mean tweets" will be immortalized for future generations. "Everything students do online reflects on them, permanently," says Donlin.

For teachers, a common stumbling block revolves around First Amendment protections and discomfort about corraling students' speech. Donlin believes that should not be a problem in most cases. "We have Second Amendment rights to possess weapons, but that doesn't mean we allow children

to bring guns to school," he observed. "When it comes to cyberbullying, we're still talking about school safety."

The new curriculum hasn't been a total remedy for Seattle's schools. In January, one middle school suspended two dozen students who "friended" or became "fans" of a Facebook page maligning another child. It was a reminder that, despite the best efforts, a school's struggle against cyberbullying never ends. "Phoebe Prince was lost earlier this year," Donlin said. "There were others before her. ... Their names and stories faded. My fear is that we'll forget the lesson learned—again. We have to teach this *now*." ♦

Recommended Resources

Books

Bullying Beyond the Schoolyard:

Preventing and Responding to

Cyberbullying by Sameer Hindjuda and Justin W. Patchin

Endorsed by the executive directors of both the National Association of Secondary School Principals and National Association of Elementary School Principals, this exemplary volume provides information, tools and strategies that can be used in every school. \$29.70; ISBN-10: 1412966892; ISBN-13: 978-1412966894

Teen Cyberbullying Investigated

by Thomas A. Jacobs, J.D.

Written by a juvenile court judge, this book consistently asks, "What would you do?" As noted in the *School Library Journal*, the book "distinguishes itself by covering more than 50 actual court cases involving teenagers. ... The hearings are a sobering reminder of the real dangers and legal consequences of cyberbullying." \$16; ISBN-10: 1575423391; ISBN-13: 978-1575423395

Online

A Thin Line

www.athinline.com

A great resource for students, this social marketing campaign from MTV addresses the "thin line between what may begin as a harmless joke and something that could end up having a serious impact on you or someone else." The campaign stands

apart from other programs directed at youth, thanks to edgy design, engaging use of multimedia and unsanitized treatments of digital abuse.

Bullying in Schools and What to Do About It **www.kenrigby.net**

This online resource from Ken Rigby, an author, former teacher and counselor, offers an array of free materials and research briefs dealing with the Method of Shared Concern, a restorative-justice approach to bullying interventions.

Cyberbullying Research Center

www.cyberbullying.us

The Center provides constantly updated information about the nature, extent, causes and consequences of cyberbullying among adolescents. Its website offers an array of downloadable resources—from word-search activity sheets to discussion guides for use at home and school.

Cyberbullying: Understanding and Addressing Online Cruelty

www.adl.org/education/curriculum_connections/cyberbullying/

This online-only curriculum from the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) offers age-appropriate lessons for early, middle and upper grades and squarely confronts the bigotry that can fuel cyberbullying. The ADL, which has regional offices across the country, also offers related workshops for school communities.

Middle School Cyberbullying Curriculum

www.seattleschools.org/area/prevention/cbms.html

This pilot curriculum from Seattle Public Schools incorporates the most promising practices of prevention—and strengthens students' writing skills at the same time. Its focus on parent engagement also makes the curriculum a standout.

NetSmartz

www.netsmartz.org/resources/reallife.htm

NetSmartz, a partnership of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, gives much attention to online predators and also offers scenarios specifically about peer-to-peer abuse, brought to life in cartoons and supplemented by activity sheets.

Wired Safety

www.wiredsafety.org

One of the longest-running online safety organizations, Wired Safety sponsors the often lauded Tween and Teen Angel programs, which train and empower youths to lead presentations about responsible technology use for other children, parents and teachers. Get your students involved, or find an Angel who can meet with students in your school.

EXCLUSIVE MEL GIBSON'S SEX

'I THOUGHT HE WOULD KILL ME'

OCTOBER 18, 2010

People

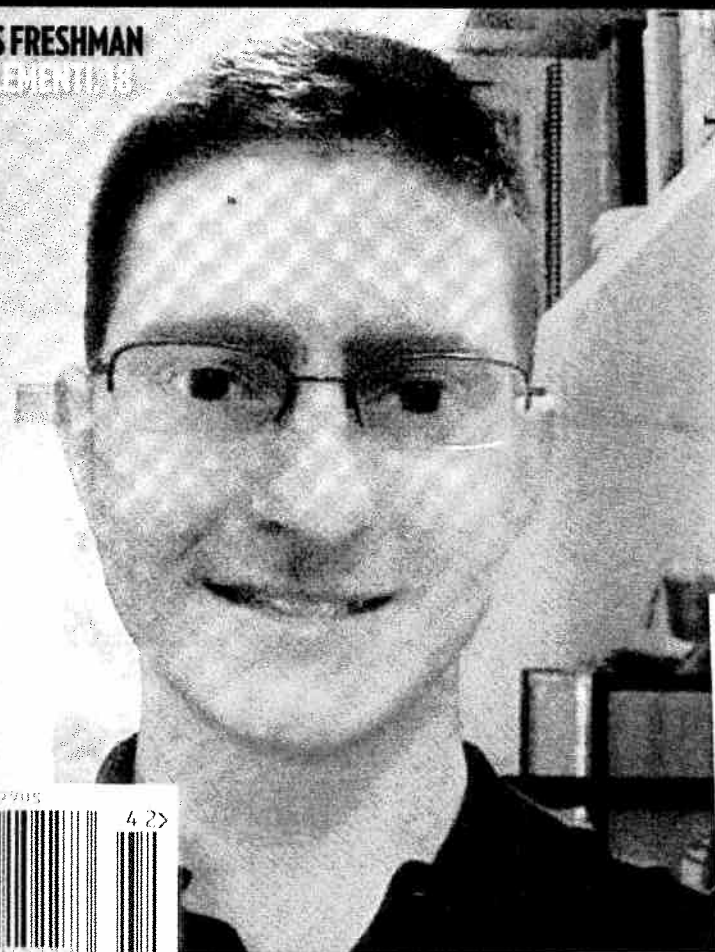
TEEN SUICIDE TRAGEDIES

DEADLY BULLYING



**OKSANA
GRIGORIEVA**

**RUTGERS FRESHMAN
TYLER CLAVIUS**



At least three teens, tormented by classmates, have taken their own lives in the past month. Why does this happen, and how can it be stopped?

**TARGET
SETH
WALSH, 13**



WHAT WENT WRONG?: "So many balls were dropped with Phoebe," says her aunt Eileen Moore (on Oct. 2 in Springfield, Mass.).

BULLYING • A SPECIAL REPORT

phoebe prince's legacy

a town tries to heal

NINE MONTHS AGO A TROUBLED 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL KILLED HERSELF AFTER BEING TAUNTED AT SCHOOL. WHAT HER FAMILY, HER TEACHERS AND THE SIX TEENAGERS NOW FACING CRIMINAL CHARGES HAVE LEARNED—AND WHY THEY WILL NEVER BE THE SAME

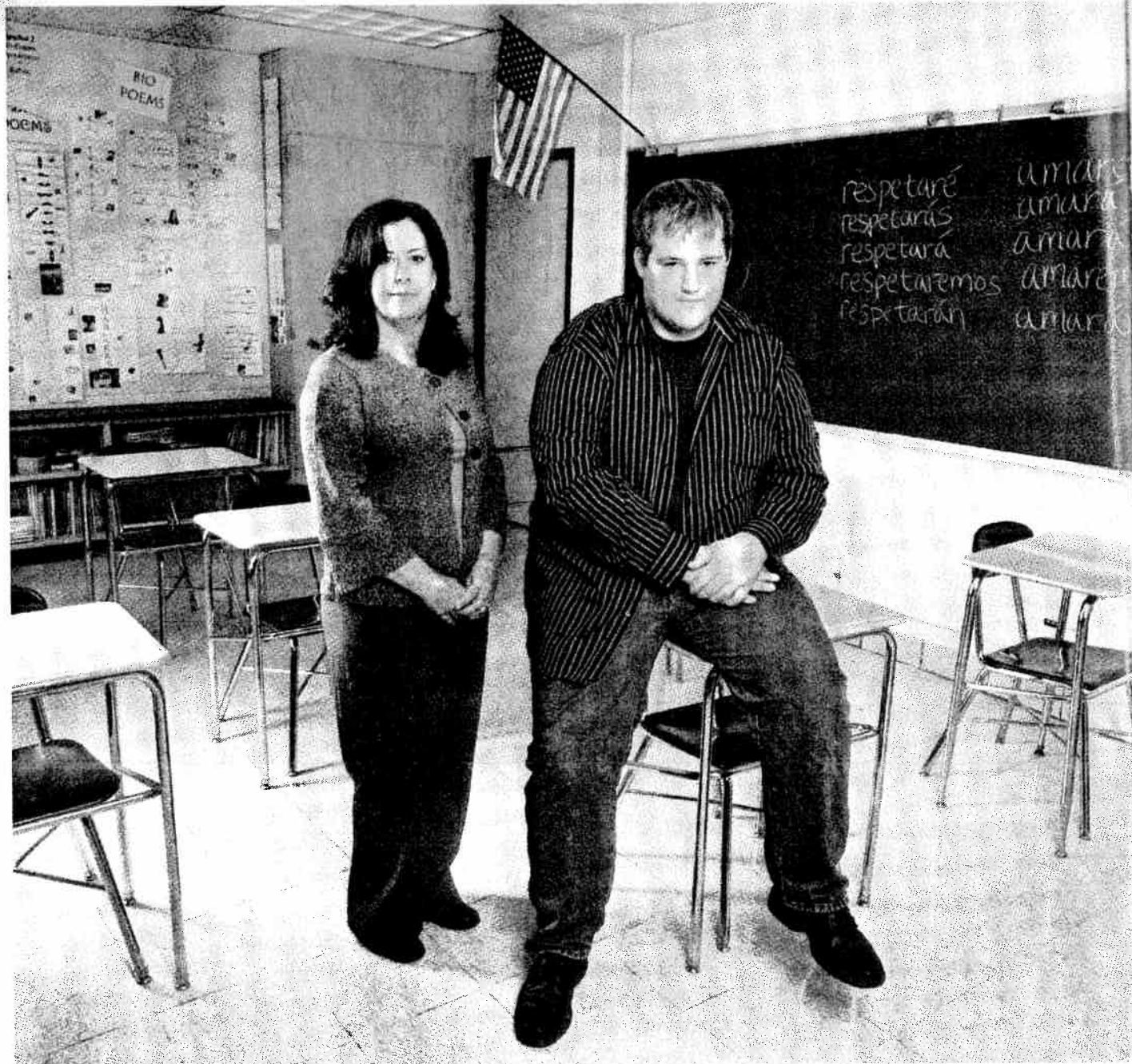
BY RAMIN SETOODEH • PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARY ELLEN MARK



The air smelled like nachos and hot dogs on Sept. 10, as the first football game of the year at South Hadley High School got under way. The home team stormed the field with a banner that read "We're Back." To the surprise of many, so was Sean Mulveyhill. The 18-year-old star captain had left school last winter just before police charged him with statutory rape in the Phoebe Prince bullying case. Wearing a white baseball cap, Mulveyhill walked right up on the field. He gave his former coach a hug, and then stayed with his old team on the sidelines, running up and down the grass, cheering them on and hooting at every touchdown. "I was happy he was back with us," says Alex Parker, a player on the team. "Everybody loves Sean. Everybody misses him."

South Hadley won big that night, but it felt like a bitter-sweet victory. Because of the case heard round the world, South Hadley High has become known as the "bully school." On Jan. 14, following weeks of vicious attacks at school and on Facebook, 15-year-old Phoebe Prince committed suicide, and, in an unprecedented move by a district attorney, six teens were slapped with felony charges. "They have a bad reputation because of what happened," says a student from nearby Holyoke High School.

While the accused bullies await trial, this Massachusetts



HEAD OF THE CLASS: "It's not okay to be continuing on with the way things were last year," says Alex Parker (right, on Sept. 17 at South Hadley High School), who sits on the antibullying task force with Nancy Farnsworth.

The South Hadley Six



Sean Mulveyhill, 18

He lost a college football scholarship and is not in school. "He is struggling," says a source. Charges include: statutory rape.



Sharon Velazquez, 17

She is working toward a GED, says her lawyer. "Even if she is acquitted, she might never recover from the derogatory effects this has caused." Charges include: stalking.



Austin Renaud, 18

His senior year unfinished, "he's living in the area, working full-time and dealing with the day-to-day pressures," a source says. One charge: statutory rape.

town of 17,000 is trying to move on. But reminders of Phoebe and her legacy are everywhere—from antibullying measures that are now being passed across the U.S. and a new banner proclaiming “RESPECT” that now hangs above South Hadley High’s front doors to lingering, bitter controversy about whether Phoebe’s death could have been prevented and whether the accused teens are getting a raw deal. “It hasn’t gone back to normal,” says police chief David LaBrie. “I don’t know if it ever will.”

In the wake of Phoebe’s death 9 months ago, her hometown became a national target. Online “hate” pages featuring some of the defendants sprang up on Facebook. “It’s been frustrating to see so many students in pain,” says Stephanie Viens, a history teacher. “I would tell my students, ‘This event doesn’t define you.’ The students would be upset, ‘Why do they hate us?’ [I’d say] ‘They don’t hate you. They are afraid that they are you.’”

Or worse, a Phoebe in the making. “I truly believe Phoebe did not want to die and just snapped and had nowhere to turn,” her aunt Eileen Moore, 53, tells PEOPLE. “The signs were there and there was no support.” Phoebe had moved to South Hadley from County Clare, Ireland, in summer 2009, an already troubled girl on Prozac and with a history of depression. After girls at her new school started calling her a “slut” for her relationships with certain boys, she started cutting herself again, her mom said in grand jury testimony. “She wanted the pain to stop,” according to Anne O’Brien Prince. Phoebe finally ended her life by hanging herself after a particularly difficult day of taunting. “If

Phoebe’s aunt speaks:

“I was not aware of the depth of her pain”

On why she is speaking now:

“I don’t want this to happen to someone else’s child.”

On her last conversation with Phoebe the night before she died:

“She was excited about [an upcoming] dance. We talked about getting her hair done for it. She wanted an updo. I didn’t see this coming.”

On why she is worried about the severe charges against the six defendants:

“I don’t want Phoebe ripped apart. My fear is they are going to get off and become warped teenage idols, saying how this has damaged their life. I’m so afraid of that.”

On what she thinks of the new antibullying law in Massachusetts, which requires parents to be notified of a bullying incident:

“It’s a great first step but I feel a phone call from the schools to the parents is nothing but the childhood game of hot potato. A follow-through must be held with trained professionals. We need to look at bullying for what it truly is—a form of emotional abuse—and treat it in the way we work to end physical and sexual abuse.”

We’ll never be the same. But hopefully the community will be stronger because of it” —STEPHANIE VIENS, A SOUTH HADLEY HISTORY TEACHER

this can happen to an intelligent, beautiful girl, it can happen to anybody,” Moore says.

Certainly her death provided a wake-up call for teachers and parents in South Hadley. “The biggest change,” says South Hadley High principal Daniel Smith, “is heightened awareness.” Eighth graders now undergo depression screening before entering their freshman year. (“They asked us if there are any problems we’d like to share,” recalls one freshman. “‘Are your friends sad?’”) South Hadley set up an antibullying committee to create a new policy, which mandates “the principal must initiate an investigation of bullying within one school day.”

And while some in the community believe the efforts are showing results, others discuss ways in which bullying is hard to eradicate—even in a school that knows firsthand bullying’s most tragic consequences. “I’ve seen improvement. Teachers are more receptive to our complaints,”

says Nancy Farnsworth, one of the members on the antibullying committee, who has two kids in the school. Parents like Susan Parker joined Facebook to monitor her kids’ accounts. “[My kids] aren’t allowed to block me,” she says, adding that she also checks the text mes-



Kayla Narey, 18

She is reportedly taking classes at a local college. After a Sept. 15 hearing, her attorney said,

“a lot of ugly, threatening stuff has been sent on the computer.” Charges include: criminal harassment.



Flannery Mullins, 17

She’s pursuing her education, but no one will say where. A judge issued a restraining order

against a neighbor after what Flannery’s attorney described as “substantial death threats.” Charges include: stalking.



Ashley Longe, 17

GED in hand, “she is nervous about the charges and wishes [it] never happened,” says a

source. On Aug. 31 she was arrested for drunk driving. She pleaded not guilty. Charges include: violation of civil rights.

sages on their cell phones.

But Parker's son Alex, 17, who sits on the antibullying task force, believes stamping out the problem isn't so simple: He says he has been teased this year about his weight, and in the first week back from summer a shouting match broke out between two students, prompting the school to issue a "code black"—all kids had to be locked up in classrooms. A few parents worry that the measures are about perception only. "They haven't changed a thing," says Susan Smith, whose son was a friend of Phoebe's. "I had nightmares of him going back." So did some of the teachers: "You could hear the pain in their voices," says Larry Murphy, a principal in West Boylston, Mass. "One of the guidance counselors went to the grocery store and was verbally assaulted—'How can you live with yourself?'"

Meanwhile, the indicted teenagers—Ashley Longe, 17; Kayla Narvey, 18; Flannery Mullins, 17; Sharon Velazquez, 17; Austin Renaud, 18; and Mulveyhill—have themselves been subjected to a form of bullying. Suspended from school while charges ranging from stalking to criminal harassment are pending, the teens still live at home but are sometimes treated as outcasts. "Public disdain and reprimand have run rampant," says Colin Keefe, Velazquez's attorney. "[Sharon] has and continues to suffer severely on virtually all levels of her life, emotionally, socially, educationally, physically. She has essentially become a social prisoner in her own home."

According to a knowledgeable source, in the spring Velazquez had a rock thrown through the window of the house in which she was staying. "They won't let her back in school and they won't give her a tutor," Keefe says. "Her mother has been going to school to get her books. She'll have to repeat the year, or a substantial portion of it." (The school says it cannot comment on individual discipline cases due to federal privacy laws.) Jennifer Mullins, Flannery's mom, joined the

They're making these kids out to be murderers. That's not the case"

—ASOUTH
HADLEY PARENT



IT STARTS AT HOME: "Are parents teaching their kids to be respectful?" says Farnsworth (with daughter Taylor Anne, 13). "That would help."

antibullying task force but had to leave because of threats. Longe was run out of a party by other girls. "She is not working," says a close ally of Longe's. "She got her GED and is looking pretty hard for a job." As for Mulveyhill, "Sean genuinely cared for Phoebe," says a friend. "Shortly after she died, they made these purple bracelets 'Phoebe Prince, Always In Our Hearts.' Sean still wears his bracelet. He hasn't taken it off since he got it."

And even Eileen Moore, Phoebe's aunt, doesn't want her niece to be remembered just as a victim of bullying. As much as she feels anger toward the six accused teenagers, she also feels that Phoebe was let down by her teachers, her school and her doctors, not just her peers. "You can't make someone be nice," she says. "You have to help the person who's being bullied get stronger." Moore hopes Phoebe's story will inspire changes at schools throughout the country. "I think her legacy will be to help other teens," she says. "We need to do better."

**With Nicole Weisensee Egan, Diane Herbst and
Judy Rakowsky**



BULLYING • A SPECIAL REPORT

I was

bullied

**...people
were
jealous**

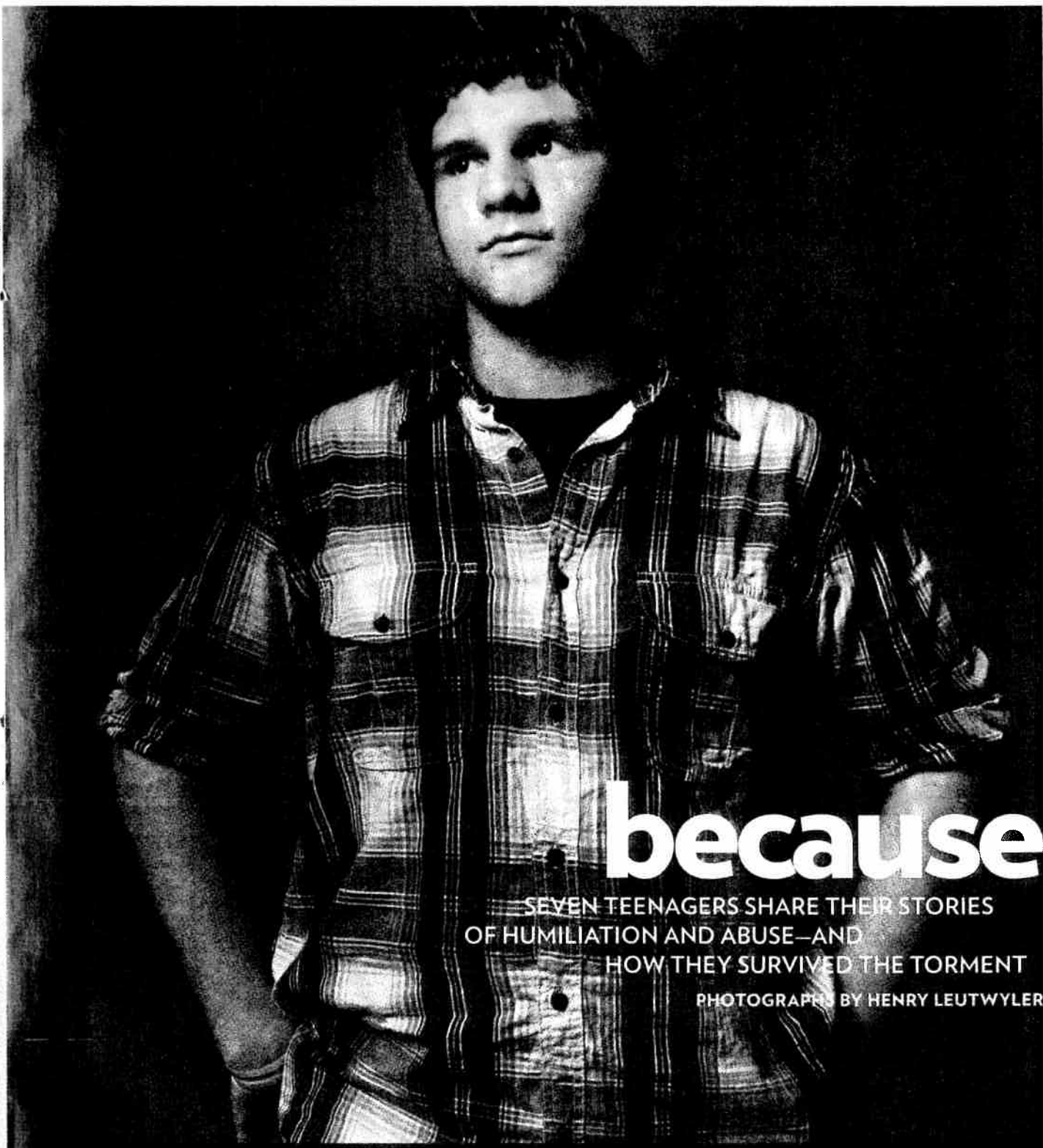
MACKENZIE SPANIER, 17

me, calling me a bitch and a slut. Sometimes he threw objects: bottles filled with liquid, pens, water bottles. Soon I was getting shouldered in the hallways and

The bullying started a year and a half ago, right after I began dating a senior varsity hockey player. A friend of his—I didn't know him at all—thought I would ruin my boyfriend's life.

He started bad-mouthing

receiving phone messages and texts from about 15 girls saying I should get out of the high school because no one liked me. Notes arrived in my mailbox calling me obscenities. One said, "All the people Mackenzie made out with" and named a bunch of my friends I'd never kissed. After my mother called the police, her boyfriend's car was painted with pictures of boobs and wieners, and our house was egged and TP'd. Then things started to die down. All of this lasted about five months, but I still don't understand people who can be a friend and then become mean to you. It can happen to anyone.



because

SEVEN TEENAGERS SHARE THEIR STORIES
OF HUMILIATION AND ABUSE—AND
HOW THEY SURVIVED THE TORMENT

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HENRY LEUTWYLER

...I am gay

JOEY KEMMERLING, 16

New Year's Eve of eighth grade, a friend told me his uncle was gay. I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "He has relationships with men." I was just, like, "Well, that's who I am." The next day I got to school and everyone knew. Kids were snickering and pointing at me. In the locker room everyone turned and looked at me. The boy who changed

next to me grabbed his stuff and said, "I don't want you checking me out." I began to dread school. One school staffer said to me, "Could you be a little less gay?" In high school the next year, a kid with a knife told me, "Your life is in my hands." I started having nightmares, gained weight, thought of taking my life. Instead, I decided to change schools and help other kids who are gay. This is not a crazy story; this happens all the time.

...we are overweight

ALEX AND PHILIPPE
HAUSSMANN, 15

Alex: It started in kindergarten with one or two people. I'd be playing with blocks and they'd knock down the tower, or they wouldn't share their blocks.

Then it spread to whole groups of people who make sure you're left out. In middle school, one teacher always assigned me to sit with a group of kids she knew hated me. They moved my desk into the corner and said, "Nobody wants to be with you, Alex."

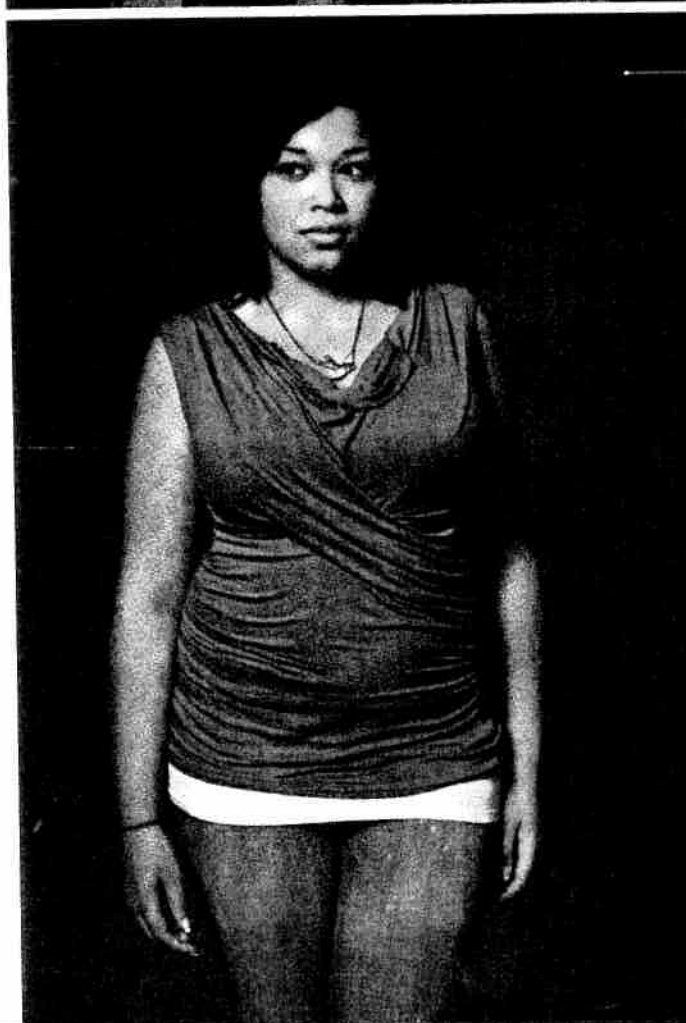
Philippe: When I was 13, a kid tripped me in gym class. It broke my foot.

Alex: Having a twin made it worse. They would shout, "Twincest!" and say we have sex with each other.

Philippe: You can't show a reaction, even a waver in your voice. They'll feed off that. You have to kind of feel bad for them.

They need to feed off your sadness to be happy.

"I used to have a thin skin. You get over it in time, and just grow a thicker one" —ALEX



...I am biracial

MORIAH KILGORE, 15

When I was about 7, I told some girls that my mom was white and my father was black. One girl said, "You do know that is illegal, and your parents are going to jail." It made me confused and sad. At the time, I lived in rural Minnesota. Most of the kids had straight blond hair. My hair was brown and very curly. A boy nicknamed me Miss Black. In fourth grade we moved to Roseville, where there are all different kinds of people. I made friends right away. But then there was girl-drama that made me feel I was ugly and a loser. I wanted to fit in with the white people but couldn't because I was black, and I wanted to fit in with the black people but couldn't because I was white. In eighth grade, black girls would say, "Oh, she has nappy hair," and laugh. Now I have more confidence. I got dreadlocks, and I like them. And I am comfortable in my own skin. I'd rather be my own person than be like 400 people who are all the same.

...I am Muslim

KHOSHNOOR PARACHA, 17

The year I moved to the United States, the kids in my eighth grade class called me a terrorist and told me to go back to Pakistan. In the locker room, they treated me like I would blow up at any minute. When they would say, "You're Pakistani, they are really, really bad," I'd say, like, "Okay, that's what I am, but when you call me a terrorist, it hurts."

That whole year, I sat alone during lunch. People threw paper balls at me, pushed me, took my food. The teachers didn't pay attention.

High school is much better. My school is very diverse, and I'm more confident. No one calls me a terrorist. Still, things happen. At the bus stop, a scary-looking man pushed me down.

No one stopped him. And a few weeks ago a woman walked by me in a store and said, "Oh my God, it smells."

"I thought if my mom went to the school it would get worse. I was new here"

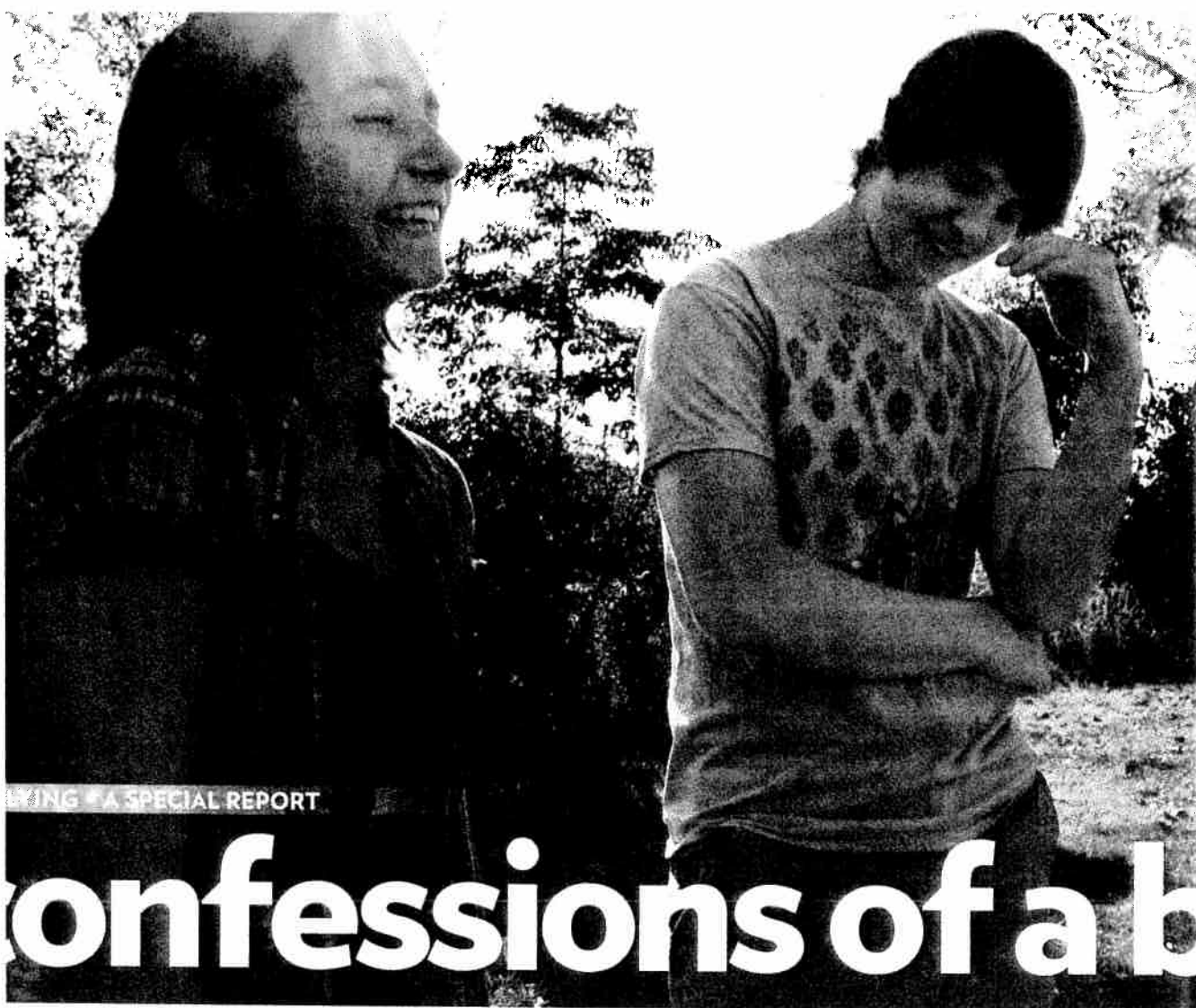
Jill Smolowe. Reported by Steve Helling, Daniel S. Levy and Diane Herbst



...just because

JAMIE ISAACS, 14

Not long after my eighth birthday, a close friend who used to come over to my house almost every day started saying, "Oh, you're rich, you're rich." That same girl stabbed me with pencils, tripped me, hit me in the face with her backpack. She recruited other girls. I'd tell my parents everything and they'd call the principal. When it got really bad, the school decided to remove me from the bus. In fifth grade a clique of girls IM'd me death threats. Later that same ring-leader started an "I Hate Jamie" club. Kids threw food at me, yelled things at me, broke into my locker 14 times and ripped my stuff. I ended up speaking at a public hearing in Suffolk County about bullying because I thought that enough is enough. The private school I go to now doesn't tolerate bullying. I am extremely happy.



LIVING • A SPECIAL REPORT

Confessions of a b

HE THOUGHT HE WAS JUST BEING FUNNY AND COOL, BUT THEN DANIEL HARRISON REALIZED THE TRUE CONSEQUENCES OF HIS UGLY BEHAVIOR

The teasing began in fifth grade, after Daniel Harrison and a neighborhood pal had a growth spurt and Courtney Kondor did not. "We were taller and just naturally started making fun of her," says Daniel, now 15 and sophomore at Mattawan High School, near Kalamazoo, Mich. "When she didn't do anything about it, we drove home more and more. Like I would see her in the school hallway and shout, 'Hey, shorty!'" By seventh grade, on the school bus, "I used to mess up Courtney's hair," Daniel says, while his pal continued to provide the laughter. "It felt cool to not be made fun of and to be the one making the fun." At no point did he think of himself as a mean bully, he says. "I thought of myself as a playful kid. I bullied with a smile on my face." One morning in December 2007 Daniel ramped up the "fun" by snatching a hat from Courtney's head. Daniel

tossed it to his sidekick, who passed it to another girl the two boys liked to tease, who in turn threw it back to Daniel. "I put the hat down my pants," he says, then clarifies, "Uh, the front. It wasn't under my boxers." As he got off the bus, Daniel says he noticed that "Courtney was devastated" and realized that he'd gone "definitely a little too far." The next morning he was summoned by his middle school dean to

talk with—and apologize to—Courtney. He was also told to report to detention the following day. None of that made much of an impression on Daniel. "I was worried about getting grounded," he says. "I wasn't worried about hurting Courtney's feelings."

Then his parents received

Bullying was satisfying. It gave me more confidence. And I kind of felt powerful"

BUMPY RIDE

"We're friends again," Daniel Harrison says of Courtney Kondor (with her last month).

ully

a phone call from the dean. Until that moment, the worst his mom, Yvette Harrison, a juvenile probation officer, and dad, Stanley, an electrician, had heard about the younger of their two sons was that he was a "class clown" and a charmer. "I was furious with Daniel," his mom recalls. "I was embarrassed. Where did I go wrong in raising him?" She grounded Daniel from playing his beloved video games for two weeks and insisted they go over to the Kondors' house to apologize. "Daniel was very nervous," she says, "but he didn't fight me on it."

There, Daniel came face-to-face with not only Courtney but her mother, Kim Kondor, whom Daniel had known for years. "As soon as Courtney's mother came to the door, we could see the anger on her face," Daniel's mom says. Kondor accepted Daniel's apology, then described how Courtney had returned from school the previous day "crying so bad she couldn't hardly get the story out." And that wasn't the only day Courtney had come home upset. "It was really shocking," says Daniel. "I thought it was, like, hurting her feelings that day and then moving on."

In detention the next day, Daniel chanced upon Ben Mikaelson's *Touching Spirit Bear*. "It was just perfect timing to read that book," he says of the story about an angry teen who torments a white bear. The following school year, assigned by his language-arts teacher Laurie Hogan-McLean to send a letter to an author describing how a particular book had proved inspiring, Daniel wrote to Mikaelson that, while reading *Bear*, "I realized who I was, and I hated it." A few months later his letter took top state honors in the national Letters About Literature contest. "Daniel opened a door to help kids reflect," says Hogan-McLean.

Today Daniel is a leader in his school's chapter of PeaceJam, a nationwide student organization that studies the deeds of Nobel Peace Prize laureates. With Courtney, 15, Daniel says, he gave her "the power" to choose what would become of their relationship. "If she wanted to kick me out of her life, so be it." Her choice: to resume their friendship. And he has become a champion of those in need. "I always end up befriending the people being bullied," he says. "It's satisfying to help people out."

By Jill Smolowe. Moira Bailey in Mattawan

Photograph by MIKE MCGREGOR

IS YOUR CHILD A TARGET OF BULLIES?

"The majority of kids are very reluctant to tell adults they've been bullied," says Kevin Jennings, assistant deputy secretary for the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools. So experts encourage parents to pay close attention to changes in behavior. A happy child can suddenly become withdrawn or pretend he's ill to avoid school. "They might say, 'I hate that school. I hate that class,'" says Marji Lipshez-Shapiro of the Anti-Defamation League. Another sign: "A kid who tells you they have no friends at school—that's a red flag," says Robin D'Antona, a bullying-prevention specialist in Falmouth, Mass. Below, other groups to turn to for help.

STOP BULLYING NOW!

The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services has launched a campaign with tips on how to identify and prevent bullying. Its website features animated stories geared toward children to help them recognize bullying behavior. "Sometimes kids send things in a text they would never say to someone's face," says Jennings, an adviser to the campaign. "You want to get them to say, 'Wow, I didn't think how that would feel.'" stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov

STOP BULLYING:

SPEAK UP The Cartoon Network is running PSAs and offers online resources for parents and kids. stopbullyingspeakup.com

GLSEN The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network offers support for schools that want to implement anti-bullying programs. "School staff sometimes have a hard time doing what's right because they're afraid of a backlash," says Eliza Byard, GLSEN's executive director. glsen.org/bullying

THE ANTI-DEFAMATION

LEAGUE This nonprofit civil rights advocacy group offers tips for parents and resources for teachers. Says Abraham Foxman, ADL's national director: "Parents and teachers need to work

together to empower kids to stand up to bullying." adl.org/combatbullying

WIREDSAFETY

The nonprofit provides tips for teens on how to navigate the Internet safely and for parents on how to keep track of their kids' web-based activities. "Kids are hurting each other online," says Parry Aftab, the group's executive director. "Parents need to let their kids know, if they pull this stuff, they'll take away their technology." wiredsafety.org

IT GETS BETTER PROJECT

After Indiana teen Billy Lucas—taunted by classmates who thought he was gay—hanged himself in September, Seattle-based columnist Dan Savage recorded a video describing how he had been bullied as a gay teen yet went on to have a happy adult life. Savage has since collected hundreds of YouTube videos of gay men and lesbians offering inspiration to teens to stay strong. youtube.com/user/itgetsbetterproject

PACER'S NATIONAL CENTER FOR BULLYING PREVENTION

The child-advocacy group, which focuses on children with disabilities, offers anti-bullying materials. pacer.org/bullying

cruel intentions

Are girls getting meaner? Rachel Simmons investigates the scary new breed of extreme bullies—and how to deal with them.

Every morning of her sophomore year, Cara* would sit in the front seat of her mom's car near her high school. But she couldn't open the door. "I stayed in the vehicle and just cried because I didn't want to go in," she recalls. Cara dreaded school because she was a victim of bullying. Her torment began as a freshman, when she started dating a junior boy. His female friends hated her, laughing in the hallway and yelling that Cara was "retarded," "fat," or "unlovable." When her guy didn't stand up for her, she ended the relationship, but the torture didn't stop.

Her male classmates joined in, and the bullying followed her everywhere: the cafeteria, classrooms, and online. As the weeks wore on, Cara sank into despair. "I felt like I had nothing to live for," she explains. "I started to believe that it was going to last forever and that death had to be better than the situation I was in. I couldn't go through the bullying anymore." After a suicide attempt, she realized that she didn't really want to die. Now, a year later, she is being home-schooled, but she plans to return to school this fall.

However, not every victim of bullying is able to overcome the experience. Earlier this year, in a story played out in countless headlines, fifteen-year-old Phoebe Prince came home from school after weeks of relentless bullying and hanged herself. After her death, messages defacing her memorial Facebook page were posted. According to the National Crime Prevention Council, nearly 60 percent of American teens witness bullying every day. And a study by national nonprofit Fight Crime: Invest in Kids found that one out of six

DUMB!

WORD GAME

PHYSICAL BULLYING —
PUSHING OR SHOVING — MAY LEAVE
BRUISES, BUT EMOTIONAL ABUSE
CAN LEAVE LIFELONG SCARS

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author succumb many things or like being an Y

spread rumors that she both was a lesbian and had sex with multiple guys; turned her friends and potential love interests against her; and even choked, "Kill yourself" as she walked down the hall. Alexandria became depressed and couldn't sleep. When she did sleep, she had nightmares. Her hair began to fall out from the stress, and she stopped eating. "I ended up starving myself after having girls say to me, 'You're so ugly,' one too many times," she admits.

"The stereotype of a bully as a boy who steals your lunch money leaves some girls unaware they are being bullied at all. 'When we thought of bullying,' it was like somebody throwing stuff at you," explains 20-year-old Bella, a self-confessed bully in junior high who was then a victim of bullying in high school. "We didn't realize that it could be a verbal and mental thing as well." Indeed, the pain can be much worse—and much harder to escape—when your tormenter is your friend. Girls bullied by friends may initially think their torment is standard drama. "When my friend turned on me, I thought, This is probably just a phase; it'll pass. But it didn't," Bella remembers.

"Terror of being friendless (even if 'friends' are the ones making their lives miserable) can trap girls in abusive situations. Stella, 15, sat at a lunch table where she was teased, given dirty looks, and excluded from every conversation. "If I distanced myself from these friends, I would have no one to sit with at lunch—but if I stayed, I would slowly rot," she says.

Unfortunately, most girls ultimately never find out why they are bullied. Because bullies often use covert tactics like rumors, victims become confused and desperate. When Kayna, 16, moved from New York to South Carolina, she was laughed at and shunned by almost everyone at her school. She dissected herself constantly: "I was like, 'Do I look different? Is there something wrong with me?' Along all day at school and overwhelmed with insults, turned backs, and laughter, girls lose faith in themselves. Some start to believe what is being said about them. "They think, I really am all those things they say I am," says Barbara Coloso, an educator who is the

middle-school and high school students are bullying victims each year. Phoebe's suicide and its ugly aftermath, however, exposed a level of bullying among girls that goes beyond typical name-calling or teasing. A new breed of mean girls, extreme bullies are willing to do anything in their power to inflict pain and humiliation—from turning entire school communities against their victims to waging campaigns of vicious online harassment.

What's causing this alarming behavior? Some experts point to reality television. Most reality programs overflow with female bullying and aggression—and in many episodes, mean-girl behavior is rewarded or seen as justified, which may create an incentive for teens to imitate it. In fact, earlier this year researchers at Brigham Young University found that reality shows have, on average, nearly twice as many aggressive acts as nonaggressive ones do.

Becca, a sixteen-year-old, thinks that about being the prettiest, skinniest girl and having the best clothes and hair. "Some girls will stop at nothing to get ahead, she says. "Girls feel a need to step on someone else to get to where they want to be on the social ladder." When boyfriends come into the picture (as was the case with both Cara and Phoebe), competition can become even more cutthroat. "If girls feel like their relationship is threatened, they do whatever they can to get secure," says Julia Taylor, a high school counselor in Apex, North Carolina. "They lose their minds for a brief moment. Their brains are affected." Girls feel justified in doing whatever they want to get the guy."

In a world where fitting in is everything, being different singles out girls as targets. "I stood out like a sore thumb in high school," recalls Alexandria, now a sophomore in college. Her outfits, musical taste, and personality challenged the status quo at school and made girls feel insecure. She recalls, "One girl warned me, 'In this school, we don't dress like that.'" Alexandria refused to change herself. Her peers retaliated. They teased her in public;

I know I'm not ugly, but when you hear it so many times, you start to believe it

—Bella, 20

author of a book about bullying. "They begin to succumb," Bella explains: "It's just a mere fact of how many times something is said to you or how long it goes on. It continues to get into your head, and it's like being brainwashed. I knew I wasn't ugly; I knew I

“People spread rumors about me and would chant, ‘Kill yourself,’ to me as I walked down the hallway”
—Alexandria, 19

wasn't a slut. But when you hear those things so many times and so many people are alienating you, it's like, OK, if nobody wants to hang out with me and I'm not good enough for anybody else, then what is the point of living?"

Coloroso advises targets of bullying not to blame themselves or look for a reason why they are being tormented. "They do it just because they can," she says. "It isn't your fault." She suggests cutting off contact with bullies by refusing to answer phone calls or e-mails. If you're being victimized online, change your Facebook settings (or delete your profile completely). And if you're hanging around ex-friends who are bullies, find other friends, Bella says. "There are so many different groups—you'll be able to find someone to be friends with. Believe in yourself." Girls can help their peers by refusing to be bystanders and instead deciding to be defenders, Coloroso says. "Sit next to the bullied girl at lunch. Stand up for her."

The most important thing, say survivors and experts, is sharing what is happening. "Do not be afraid to speak out," Cara says. "Tell anyone, tell an adult, tell someone at your school what's going on." Ask them for protection against retaliation if necessary. And remember: Hurting your body just makes things worse. No matter what, be true to you, she says. "Be yourself, and don't try to make someone else happy. The only person that really matters is you." □

**Name has been changed.*

Rescue Missions

Whether you or a friend is in danger, suicidal thoughts should always be taken seriously. Here's what you need to know.

RECOGNIZE THE SIGNS

Get help if you're feeling high anxiety, total hopelessness, or chronic loneliness. "Suicidal thinking is a symptom of depression, and if you are having persistent or recurring thoughts of suicide or are making plans about how to end your life, seek immediate assistance," says Paula Clayton, M.D., medical director for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

TALK IT OUT

"Tell someone you trust. I'm not sure I can deal with the way I feel without help," says Bev Cobain, R.N., author of *When Nothing Matters Anymore: A Survival Guide for Depressed Teens* (Free Spirit Publishing). Reaching out to a person your own age may feel the most natural and is a good first step, but it might not be sufficient, says Hemanshu Nigam, Internet-safety expert and an advisor to SafetyWeb.com. "They might not know what to do, which is why it's important that you talk to an adult as well," he says. **If you don't feel comfortable speaking to your parents, try reaching out to a coach or school counselor.** And there are anonymous hotlines to call, such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at (800) 273-TALK and the National Hopeline Network at (800) SUICIDE.

LOOK AFTER YOUR FRIENDS

If you suspect that a friend might be suicidal, here are some signs to look for: **"Be aware of changes in behavior, such as losing interest in ordinary activities, starting or increasing drug or alcohol abuse, not wanting to hang out with friends, talking about death or suicide, or making statements like 'No one would miss me if I were gone,'"** Clayton says. Also, keep an eye on online activity. "A cry for help can be as simple as a status update that seems unusual," Nigam says.

BE HONEST

Being straightforward is the best way to approach an at-risk friend. **"People generally react to directness in a very open way,"** Nigam says. Understand that your friend might need help initiating this difficult conversation. "It's OK to ask your friend 'Do you ever think about suicide?'" Cobain says. "Most of the time, they'll answer truthfully," Nigam agrees. "Asking questions is one of the most important things you can do." —LAUREL PANTIN