

This is what bullying feels like

Kate Hammer

Saturday, Dec. 03, 2011

Every year in Canada more than 200 teenagers feel alone and scared enough to kill themselves. For many, including Marjorie Raymond, life has been made unbearable by bullies.

The 15-year-old Quebec teen's suicide earlier this week, and the apologetic note she left for her mother, have prompted the province to review anti-violence programs in its schools. In Ontario, where two other tormented teens recently took their own lives, policy makers and educators are considering new laws that would create tougher consequences for bullies.

A 2009 survey by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health found that one in three students is bullied. The ratio is even higher at the East Alternative School of Toronto. Many are here because their previous school had become a living hell, a place where they were taunted, picked on, beaten up or just ignored. The 68 students in Grades 7 and 8 are the ages where research shows bullying is at its peak. The school provides something of a safe haven – a specialized school with a focus on social justice in which bullying is given as much attention as dodgeball or long division.

The Globe and Mail asked students to share their thoughts.

WITNESSES

Vannie Kopalakrishnan

Where was I when bullying was happening? I was hiding. Hiding from the consequences that I would have to face if I reported to a teacher what was being done. I was hiding from what was morally correct. I ask myself, why?

I remember standing along with the others, watching a small girl be rejected from a game of tag. It was back in third grade. But it wasn't the first time that this happened. In fact, it happened on a daily basis. I had the urge to tell the others that it wasn't right, it wasn't right to shun the poor girl. But there I stood, telling myself, "You're not part of this. You're not the bully!"

Tears flowed down her eyes. This was back in the third grade.

Some say that the bully should suffer consequences. To me, that's not true. But the witness needs consequences, too. The witness is almost as bad as the bully. You're the one that is letting it happen. That young girl back in the third grade was the same as you and me. She had eyes, a mouth, a nose. She had feelings. She was a human. Like us all. Bullying her would be like bullying yourself. The only difference is that all the hurt, all the sorrow and frustration is handcuffed to her.

Zoe Sherar

I've seen bullying get to the point where someone was stuffing this one girl's clothes in the toilet. It was

Grade 6, so imagine the extremes people would go to in even older grades. Our teacher got involved but he did not understand what was really happening and it didn't change. I still feel guilt because I knew that I had the power to do something about it and I didn't step in because I was afraid.

Now I realize that I would rather become the victim than feel the guilt. The only people with the true power are the students. Sure, the teachers can get you in trouble and tell you that it's wrong, but that doesn't mean that it will stop. I had the power to make an impact and maybe stop it and I didn't use my power. That's why I feel the guilt.

All of these feelings are horrible and bullying all around is hurtful. It is something that can crush someone and make their life turn upside down. School is a main spot where a lot of bullying happens. For some people, school is a breeze and for some people school and life is a living hell. No wonder teens commit suicide every year. It is just too hard.

I think that the government putting a law in place to stop it is a good first step to make bullies and witnesses think twice about what they do. But I think that more needs to be done as well because the bully can make the bullying action secretive. I think that teachers, parents and staff should be stricter and students should take a stand and end bullying. This is a huge issue and everyone is responsible and everyone should be involved to bring it to an end.

Jack Poulton

I was a witness and I was bullied. In grade 6, our class decided that making fun of other racial groups was funny. Until it happened to me. I was in the school walking down the hall talking to my friend when I must have said something he didn't like and he muttered under his breath "Jew." At the moment I didn't really care.

Before I realized it, two of my close friends' biggest insult was calling someone a Jew. I am Jewish with grandparents who survived the holocaust. It got to the point where they would throw pennies, dimes, loonies and toonies down the hall saying "go get it."

Whenever we told them off they would just say it's their joke. I was a witness in the same year. Our class was reading a book which had some racism in it towards Indian people. I laughed at first, but then it got out of hand with lots of Indian jokes. I am ashamed to say I didn't do anything. 32 students it was funny, I didn't. I didn't do anything about it. Thinking back to it, I say "Where was I?. And "Where are you?"

Jepson London

For one year of elementary school, I sat on the bus as some of the most hurtful words I have ever heard in my life passed through one of my ears and out the other. These words could only have come from a bully. I was not the victim in that case, but even so, I fell silent with fear all those days. The victim on that bus was autistic and just because he was considered "weird" some of thought it only fitting to torment him. I'm now in middle school but his crying haunts me.

Bullying can be so scary for some that they never stand up. That's why extreme versions of bullying, like the holocaust were never stopped because people were too afraid of Hitler and his wrath to ever lead a revolt.

Hannah Szeptycki

If there's one thing I hate, it's when people don't care about bullying. I hate when people say, "It's no big deal" because it is. I hate when people say you won't get affected because everyone is and I hate when people say it'll get better because it won't.

I've had my fair share of getting picked on. I've also been a bully many times, and I have seen a kid get bullied too many times to count. The worst position is the position of witness. Some days I have trouble falling asleep because I've seen someone being bullied and not said anything. I know most people in my class have been in the same situation. People have to stop being scared and start standing up to people. Here's a message to everyone who is reading this. Things will get better, but only if we make them better.

Justin Vriend

Few of us can say that we are not witnesses. Not bystanders. Witnesses, I have had the privilege of being safe from much bullying. I have always been one of the tallest students in my class. I am white. I have high grades. I have no allergies, disabilities or mental handicaps. I am very lucky.

I have, however, stood next to the bully and did nothing. I have hidden behind a half-hearted grin, afraid to stand up lest I be the next victim. There's the key word. Afraid. Fear of children my own age.

What world is this that playgrounds have become killing grounds. The murder of hope, love, creativity, passion, ingenuity, individually. This goes unpunished. Unnoticed. Why? When these die, our very person dies.

How do children's executions come without a herald? Fear. Adolescents, children, minorities, even majorities. These get picked out of the crowd like slow calves by unprovoked coyotes.

I am overjoyed that the few wolves from my old school did not find their ways to this new haven at EAST. I feel safe here. Safe in the knowledge that no matter how hard a wolf nips my toes, the shepherds will protect me.

Hundreds of suicides happen every year because bullies are not banished from schools. Students' don't feel as if adults can make things happen and there is no anonymous reporting system. Shepherds, up your game across Canada.

VICTIMS

T. Williams

I would prefer not to use my full name, but I want to stand by this letter, so I will use my last name. My name is T. Williams. Before I tell you my story, there are three things you need to know.

1. I felt scared
2. I was a loner
3. I'm Japanese

I was a loner. I kept everything bottled up. Rarely talked. And the few friends I had weren't close. I didn't see the point of friends. If I witnessed something, I didn't say.

I remember the first time I went to Scout camp. Our troop's campsite was beautiful. We could go fishing, swimming and raspberry picking. There, I met this kid named CG. I told him I was Japanese. CG then answered with "Oh! No offence but ... hate you." I asked why, and he said, "Because you killed my grandfather in the Second World War." For the rest of the camp, he was a little piece of hell inside my

head. I never saw him after camp, but after that summer, I promised myself to never let any person be racist to Japanese people, or to any other culture.

Two years later, I came to E.A.S.T., and I loved it. I thought it was normal not to have so many friends. Now people come up to me to talk and that's new to me. It wasn't until this year when I started telling my story. Even then, only a few people knew. I didn't even tell my parents about this story until now. I used to keep things bottled up, now I've smashed that bottle.

To the people who know who this is, friends, mom and dad, brother and sister, I'm sorry. I always found it easier to keep things to myself, now I don't. If you want to come up to me and start talking to me about my story, please don't. It's too close to me, and I'm still scared. Some days I wake up and I can't trust anyone. It's still a battle for me to let things out. To all those I love, I'm sorry for not being able to tell you how I really feel sometimes. To all those shy kids, you need to tell someone, otherwise you will feel alone with lots of weight and pressure on your shoulders.

Helen Rotenberg

Bullying. It can make you feel like you are the worst person on the planet. And that's exactly what happened to me.

Going into Grade 4, the girls in the class turned on me. I was petrified. I would cry myself to sleep not wanting to go to school the next day. It wasn't a physical bullying. Constant whispering and snickering was what drove me insane. It was as if they were laughing hyenas. I wasn't the kind of person who told my parents a whole lot about my personal life so I trapped myself in this vicious cycle. How did they bully me? Simple. They would find the tiniest imperfection and nag me about it until I felt like I was the ugliest person in the world. At one point, it became so difficult that I almost wanted to kill myself. And I am not exaggerating. One day in late June, I finally confessed to my dad. It was a five-minute drive home but by the end of it I was sobbing. I had all of the pain and anger bottled up. By the end of Grade 4, I was all ready and set to switch schools for Grade 5. The bullying had changed me in ways that still affect me to this day.

Writing this, I am tearing up. Sometimes it is hard for me to speak up on new ideas because they always used to shoot me down. And I still have a self-conscious body image. If you are a parent, I am begging you to check in with your child and see how things are doing. I was lucky that I had somewhere else to go, but for some people it can become so unbearable that they need to take their lives. So the message? It can't be ignored. Bullying is a form of torture. Please, do something.

Keegan Sheridan

When you hear about bullying and teen suicide you ask yourself "where the hell were the teachers?" In my experience, my teachers haven't done anything. They say they are doing something but they are just making themselves feel better. I had been bullied from grade 4 to 6 and it sucked. Sometimes when it happens you come home thinking "I can't do this, I just want to be gone, dead. Anything is better than what is happening." I have also been a witness to this. My friends have been bullied, and I have tried to stop it only to be hit or tormented. I know for a fact that everyone was a bully some time or another, me too, I have bullied until I realized what was I doing. And then I felt, oh my god, what am I doing. If the people reading this are my former bullies, this is directed to you. You're killing people. You are scarring them for life. You are also scarring yourself. how does it make you feel better by throwing a basketball at someone's head? I left my school because of bullies. Now I'm at E.A.S.T.. E.A.S.T. is a very safe

environment, it may have some bullying but our teachers stop it right away. For all those parents who have lost their child to bullying, my condolences. To all those being bullied, I know what you are going through, stay strong and fight back.

Sara Upshur

Bullying did take over my life at one point at my old school. My life got so unstable that I was almost one of the 300 people who take their lives each year.

I was the victim. My name is Sara Upshur and I have grown up in the beach my whole life and I was happy. It took only four girls and a couple of weeks to turn my world upside down. I was angry at my parents all the time.

They would taunt me and tell me and tell me nasty things. Those girls got into my head, and I went into a hiding place so I couldn't be sent to school. I wanted to take my life. I told the teachers and my parents. What was to happen? My parents helped me, but it wasn't enough. The teachers had a 'talk' with the girls on how it was self-destructing and I couldn't fix myself.

Things need to change. It's now or never. Everyone sees videos, hears the news about bullying and do nothing about it. I wasn't strong enough to stand alone, but with more people, we can.

I'm at E.A.S.T. and I feel safe and confident again. We all know each other and we're all accepted, no matter what. This is how everyone needs to be. We have to change. We must take a stand. Alone we are looked at as if we are nothing. Together we can be heard.

Imagine if this was happening to you and no one came to your aid. How would you feel? No matter who you are, you could be a bully, victim or witness. Sometimes you don't say anything because you think it will get worse. Bullies want power and if you give it to them, they will take advantage of you. Don't stand down.

Charlie Johnston

I am a bully, I am a witness and I am a victim so I guess I have a pretty good sense of how people bully and why and yet it still bewilders me.

A majority of the bullying that I have seen is brought on by the tiniest things. In grade four, my friend and I thought it was funny to speak in a high pitched voice. A bully got wind of this and thought he'd mess with us. Soon he left the school and I thought my problems were over.

Then one day he came to my school and called me several names and finished off by saying he was going to beat me up. I ran into the school to report this but he followed and pushed me up against the wall near the office, called me a faggot and walked off. It was only when I yelled, "Being gay isn't a bad thing" that the secretary noticed. So there is my story: From talking in a funny voice being abused and called a faggot.

BULLIES

Olivia Caron

I've been lucky enough to have not been bullied seriously. However, I have been the bully before. It was

last year, which tells you that even at a school with an anti-bullying policy, things still happen.

I had two groups of friends, but I started drifting away from one of the groups. I had just gotten an iPhone and me and my closer friends would make videos on my phone at lunch. We would do crazy things and scream and sing songs. Then we started making fun of people. We made fun of three people by imitating them, exaggerating how they did things, making up how they walk, quoting them on things they never actually said.

For two boys, it happened twice, but for a girl named Sophie, it happened many more times. There was peer pressure all around us when we made these videos. There was one specific video that lots of people knew about, and it was the meanest.

We showed lots of people, laughing about it.

One day, I walked home with two friends who were also friends with Sophie. I showed them the video, laughing. They told me that it was mean and not funny, but I shook it off. People started to forget and we didn't make any more videos.

About two weeks after, I saw those friends at the teacher's desk. It turns out that they were telling her about the video. I was so mad at first, but now I'm glad they told.

I think all teachers and parents should deal with bullying the way E.A.S.T. does. The next day, I was brought into the teacher's office about four times. They questioned all the girls over the next week. We were warned that if it happened again, we would be suspended. We didn't realize how serious it was until the teachers talked to us. If they didn't deal with it, it would have gotten worse.

In the end, I learned that I will never do anything like that again. If all adults dealt with it like that, 300 kids wouldn't die each year.

It's hard to stop bullies, but it's not impossible.

Anonymous

When I was younger I was made fun of all the time. People would continuously kick me out of groups and not let me play soccer. I spent many recesses all alone sitting in a corner dreaming of when the bell was going to ring. I lost the feeling to express myself. When it came to Grade 6 and the bully left, I felt really powerful. I never wanted to lose that feeling of power so I thought that by bullying other kids it would get better. Halfway through the year, one kid talked to me and said how he thought I was being a bully.

After this I realized I didn't need to make other people feel bad to make me feel good.

At E.A.S.T. people tell me they feel that they can tell anyone anything, but I still don't feel that way. I still think that people are going to judge me if I say something wrong. I wake up in the morning and try to wear my best clothes so people don't judge me. I don't want my name included because I feel like people will judge me for expressing my thoughts.