

Family and friends mourn the tragic loss of teenager

Stacey Escott

Mon Sep 12 2011

Christopher Howell called his mother on Thursday afternoon. He told her he loved her, he loved his father and said he was going to kill himself. Frantic, his mother rushed home, but it was too late. Her 17-year-old son had taken his own life.

Upwards of 150 friends and family gathered outside of Chris's east-end high school, Sir Winston Churchill, Sunday evening to mourn his loss. It was as much about celebrating his life as it was a call to put a stop to bullying.

The crowd lit candles, gave speeches and wore yellow ribbons and shirts that read "Stop bullying." His mother stood by with a bouquet of yellow flowers.

"I just want to stop it," said Judy Saulnier Howell. "I don't want anyone else to have to pay." Friends and family say Chris, a Grade 12 student, had a troubled time in school. They say he was bullied and taunted. Before Chris ended his life, his father said he told his mother he couldn't deal with it anymore.

"Everybody is talking about this great education system we have. What about the bad part of the education system?" John Howell asked. "What's happening in the hallways? What's happening in these playgrounds? What's happening to some of these kids that feel different? Bullying has got to stop." The Hamilton Spectator does not normally report on suicides. However, his father spoke openly about the circumstances surrounding Chris's death, which was widely discussed on social media. Sunday night's public vigil also raised questions about the broader societal issue of bullying. A teenager thought the only way out of a terrible situation was to end his life. Why did he feel this way? What resources were available to help him?

Howell said the bullying has been going on since grade school. Chris was always looked at as being different because he had Tourette's syndrome, which is characterized by involuntary movements or vocalizations called tics, obsessive-compulsive disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. His father said Chris was being treated for those disorders and also receiving counselling to deal with the bullying and his own anger management issues.

When he attended Crestwood School on the Mountain, his dad said he got along "half-decent" with the other kids because they were alike. Last year, he moved on to Churchill.

Tribute pages on Facebook show support from more than 500 members who are concerned about school bullying. Friends said kids would constantly torment Chris. His father said he raised the problem with the school board, principals and teachers.

Jackie Penman, communications manager with the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, said she can't comment on specific cases because of privacy reasons.

"What I can tell you is that we take all incidences of bullying extremely seriously," said Penman. She said schools use various intervention strategies to address bullying behaviour. One such initiative is restorative justice, where the students involved in a particular incident are brought together. Penman says this method is supposed to hold the offenders accountable and help students understand how their actions impact others.

"There are certainly a number of supports within a school to deal with bullying, for example, mentoring EAs (educational assistants), student success support, social work support, and learning resource teachers. These individuals all work together to support the students," said Penman.

A response team will be deployed to Chris's school to help students and staff deal with the tragedy. Odessa Bulpje is one of Chris's closest friends. They met last year at school. She said Chris was afraid of certain people who threatened him over the summer. It started again on the first day of school.

"A lot of people bullied him. He would go into the school and people would just start making fun of him about the way he looks and the way he acts. It's always been like that for him," said Bulpje.

The student body was notified Friday afternoon by the principal, Glenn Cooke. They were told Chris had passed away at the hospital the night before, and students were asked to respect the family's privacy. They were told guidance counsellors were available for anyone who needed support.

Lesley Cunningham, a social worker with the board who specializes in violence prevention, said she too cannot address this case specifically.

But generally speaking, "It's the most dreadful thing that a young person, for whatever reason, feels like they have no options other than to take their own life," said Cunningham. "We have seen this over the years that young people have come to the point where (they) feel that they need to do that. I think that is why we have to take it seriously. We can't ignore it."