

How Many More Youth Suicides Do We Need to Act? By Lynne Azarchi

By now you know the tragic story of Tyler Clementi, the college student who committed suicide on the George Washington Bridge to escape humiliation and embarrassment from a videotape of his sexual encounter. Likely the two Rutgers students who broadcasted his private moments on the internet without his consent, wish they hadn't. But it is too late.

Too late for their brains to evaluate kindness and decency. Too late to teach Molly Wei and Dhurun Ravi how thoughtlessness becomes cruel actions. Too late to convey how reality shows violate the concept of privacy and empathy. Never mind that both perpetrators graduated from one of the top high schools in the nation; never mind that they were raised in wealthy suburban communities.

There is a virus growing in our culture and it is known as predatory behavior or bullying. Carried by reality shows, violent videogames, and misused social media, it does not differentiate between gated communities, white picket fences or public housing. All it cares about is finding a host to help it thrive.

The hosts are young, developing brains that don't mature until 23-25 years old. Biological research says that the frontal cortex doesn't fully develop until the early 20s, biasing the adolescent's action toward immediate over long-term gains. And yet, we collectively barrage our tweens, teens and young adults with sanctioned images of exclusion, humiliation and violence.

For many kids, social interaction consists of an online post: "like" or a "fan." Tyler's site already has 25,000 "likes", but do they help Tyler? Do these posts prevent future bullying? Does social media help other kids become strong enough to '*stand up and speak out*' when they see something wrong? Did any of Molly's or Dhuran's friends say 'no' or 'stop' when they heard what they were up to? Apparently not.

College students today have 40 percent less empathy than people their age did two to three decades ago, according to a new study from the University of Michigan. The analysis indicated that relative to their late-1970s' counterparts, today's college students are less likely to make an effort to understand their friends' perspectives or to feel tenderness or concern for the less fortunate.

"Many people see the current group of college students -- sometimes called 'Generation Me' -- as one of the most self-centered, narcissistic, competitive, confident and individualistic in recent history," observed Sara Konrath, one of the study's researchers. The study cited increased media exposure and more competitive social environments as possible reasons for the dip in empathy.

Whining about technology won't help. We must accept that our kids have become desensitized. The debate over the evils of video games, violence and stupidity in television and movies, or whether or not kids are "sexting"— is not productive. It only delays us from addressing the kinds of behavior that costs lives.

Accept that the 'horse is already out of the barn' regarding technology and its ability to spread "entertainment" like wildfire. Parents, educators and kids need to get the tools and strategies to defend themselves and others from predatory and discriminatory behavior. That means learning how to recognize it, address it, and protect youth from it before they become suicidal or headlines.

Accept that educators/school administrators cannot solve this problem alone. We as parents, adults in the community, and business leaders are the ones who can do the most good. Bullying is real and on the rise. Cyber-bullying is escalating. We are fostering more and more desensitized kids capable of disturbing and harmful behavior.

So what's the number of kid suicides that will be the tipping point for us? How close to your family will bullying have to occur for it to become urgent enough for your attention? How many headlines will it take for us to work harder collectively to improve school and college cultures, making them safer?

By the way, this is the second suicide at Rutgers for harassment and Rutgers is not the only college campus, high school or middle school that needs to make school life safer for all students. And let's not forget the recent suicides of Asher Brown, Phoebe Price, Carl Walker Hoover, Billy Lucas, Seth Walsh and all the other kids too numerous to list here. These tragic losses serve as teachable moment suggestions for parents, youth and educators which include:

- Watch reality shows with your kids; dissect them and discuss them.
- Discuss decency, privacy and invasion of privacy.
- Discuss social media: what's good about it and what's not?
- Examine desensitization: what kind of media numbs us to kindness, civility and respect?
- Discuss why there is so much humiliation and exclusion shown on TV/internet, often with a "laugh track."
- Consider the need for more tolerance museums like the one on campus at The College of New Jersey (perhaps create one at Rutgers?).

Tyler's parents issued this statement: "...our hope is that our family's personal tragedy will serve as a call for compassion, empathy and human dignity." Can you hear Tyler calling us?

*Lynne Azarchi is Executive Director of Kidsbridge. Kidsbridge has created a tolerance museum (www.kidsbridgemuseum.org) a.k.a. learning lab on campus at The College of New Jersey in Ewing, with college students and retired seniors as docents. The museum features the exhibit "Face to Face: Dealing with Prejudice and Discrimination," and includes additional exhibits on name-calling, anti-bullying, heroes, community service, Bystander and Upstander behavior and media literacy. Each year, the museum is visited by grades second through twelve, leadership groups, Boy/ Girl Scouts and faith groups. Kidsbridge conducts an annual competition for community service and provides other character education and diversity appreciation programs, including weekly life skill programs for Trenton youth. www.kidsbridgemuseum.org.
Blog:www.kidsbridgemuseum.wordpress.com*