

Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray and the esteemed members of the HELP committee, thank you for the opportunity to share my son, Tyler Clementi's story today. I hope you will learn from his experiences and allow his story to motivate you to create safe spaces in our higher education system, so that no other young person will ever have to experience or endure the pain, hurt, shame and humiliation that Tyler endured.

Tyler's Story

We were and are a very private and quiet family, who like many families once had many hopes and dreams, especially for our children. We enjoyed the simple pleasures of spending as much family-time together as we could, whether at home in Ridgewood, NJ or traveling on vacation. Our family consists of my husband, Joseph who is a civil engineer by education, myself a registered nurse, James my oldest son who graduated from Skidmore College in May 2009 and now works for The Tyler Clementi Foundation, Brian our middle son who graduated from Cornell University in May 2010 and is a mechanical engineer, and our youngest son Tyler, who graduated Ridgewood High School in June of 2010.

Our youngest son Tyler was a loving son, a kind and caring brother, a thoughtful friend, and a compassionate young man. He had a great sense of humor and a cheerful easy going disposition. He always woke up with a smile on his face. A warm welcoming smile that seemed to announce that the new day was going to be good no matter what came along. Tyler was also very creative, smart and curious. He loved to investigate, explore and travel. He was so full of life and energy. Tyler had many interests in his short life, as most children do, as they move through different phases and stages. But Tyler's one special love that remained constant was music. He was a gifted musician and his instrument of choice was the violin. He was an accomplished violinist.

Tyler was very special and precious to us, his family, but he was unknown to the world until the fall of 2010 when he made national headlines. He had just started his freshmen year at Rutgers University. Tyler's roommate web-cammed Tyler in a sexual encounter with another man and then Tyler's roommate tweeted about Tyler's encounter inviting many others to join in and watch, announcing to the entire world a very personal moment that should have remained just that, a private encounter.

I can only imagine that these bullying actions by his roommate must have humiliated Tyler in front of his new dorm mates. This may have even caused Tyler to think that his sexual orientation was something to be laughed at and ashamed of. At this point Tyler's reality became twisted and distorted. Tyler could no longer see how special and precious he was. He was not able to see or find the support and resources he had available to him. Tyler became totally consumed with and only concerned about the words of people who were interested only in humiliating him. These bullying actions must have caused Tyler to feel isolated, alone, worthless, and so very desperate.

Because it was at this point that Tyler made a decision that we will never be able to undo or change. On September 22, 2010 Tyler died by suicide. He was 18 years old.

Tyler made a decision that cannot ever be changed or corrected, a decision that not only affected Tyler but our entire family and many others who knew and loved him. My world crashed to a stop and then crumbled apart with the devastation and trauma of the loss of my son. The anguish and despair has been overwhelming at times. It has been a long dark journey of much sadness and many tears. It remains an ongoing battle to push back the sadness and hold on to the peace. A peace that only recently I have been able to find, now that the fog and haze of the trauma has finally lifted, now after almost 70 months. My life's journey is one I hope no one else will ever have to travel, live through or endure. A piece of me has died and I have been left with an empty space deep within. I will be forever missing a part of me. All memories and photos were excruciating to look back on. It was strange but all of my memories, my

happy moments from the past quickly turned and twisted in my head to a future that would never happen. Tyler was gone and our family would never be whole again. The simple pleasures of family time together are no more. Every holiday or special family event is unbearable and incomplete because Tyler is missing.

Also adding to our family's pain was the added torment of enduring a criminal trial against Tyler's roommate for invading Tyler's privacy during a sexual act, hindering an investigation and tampering with evidence. The pain and anguish that I felt during the trial, was overwhelming at times, as I seemed to be listening and watching through Tyler's ears, eyes and mind. As different pieces of evidence were presented they would trigger memories, both good and bad, but none the less all bittersweet and sad. Even simple things such as Tyler's laptop, reminded me how he carefully explored his options and then chose the different features he liked best, including the blue color for the case. And the photos of his dorm room, reminiscing on how carefully we had shopped for all the components of his room, like the lamps and the bedding and all the other accessories and how excited he was to be setting it up and settling in at college. How quickly this all changed.

As much as we would like to go back and change Tyler's actions we can't, but we can move forward by working to change the mindsets and attitudes of people who think that actions like setting up a camera and tweeting messages like "come join in and watch the show" - are acceptable, because they are not. This is why my husband, Joe and I started the Tyler Clementi Foundation, to put an end to all online and offline bullying in schools, workplaces and faith communities.

Background information about Bullying

According to Stopbullying.gov, "bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time. Bullying includes actions such as making threats, spreading rumors, attacking someone physically or verbally, and excluding someone from a group on purpose."⁶ This can be deceiving to many young

adults who associate the term bullying with school-aged children and something that is less serious than it truly is. This definition can be misleading and might even be seen as a middleclass suburban problem. But bullying behaviors do not magically disappear at a certain age, it can and will continue on into adulthood unless there is behavior modification. Bullying behaviors are serious and can sometimes rise to the level of criminal hazing, harassment, invasion of privacy and/or stalking. And to my knowledge at this point in time there are no federal laws that address the full effects of bullying behaviors or promotes any type of prevention measures.

Tyler's situation and the end result may have been the extreme, but it is important to remember that no matter what the immediate outcome, all bullying and harassment hurts and almost always leaves painful physical and emotional scars, which can sometimes last a life time. The painful physical and emotional effects of bullying can manifest with emotional distress leading to self-harming behaviors such as alcohol and drug use and/or abuse, cutting, unprotected sex, anxiety, low self-esteem, depression and suicidal ideation. It can also interfere in productivity and attendance at school and work.

I am not sure why Tyler's story attracted so much attention but one thing I have learned is it is not an isolated occurrence. Everywhere I go people share how they connect to some part of Tyler's story, maybe not the exact situation but some part of his circumstances as well as the emotional toll that Tyler must have experienced. Over 3.2 million students report that they have been the victim of some form of bullying every year, that number is astronomical and unacceptable. This is not a rite of passage or simply kids being kids, this is a public health threat.

Here are just a few statistics.....

28% of U.S. students in grades 6–12 have experienced bullying.¹

20% of U.S. students in grades 9–12 have experienced bullying.³

9% of students in grades 6–12 experienced cyberbullying.¹

15% of high school students (grades 9–12) were electronically bullied in the past year.⁴

55.2% of LGBT students experienced cyberbullying.⁵

30% of young people admit to bullying others in surveys.²

70.6% of young people say they have seen bullying in their schools.²

62% witnessed bullying two or more times in the last month and 41% witness bullying once a week or more.²

The Tyler Clementi Foundation

As an organization, The Tyler Clementi Foundation has initiated several awareness programs based on Tyler’s story as well as partnerships to provide anti-bullying research, information and tools for youth, parents and youth serving professionals.

Day One Campaign

Our Day One Campaign is a simple, innovative, research-based and effective intervention designed to prevent bullying before it happens. Day One Campaign creates a safe inclusive atmosphere within a community where everyone is embraced not despite their differences but because of their differences. One of the pieces of knowledge I learned, is that bullying is a power imbalance or struggle. People are usually targeted because they are different. The difference can be real or perceived or

even at times fabricated. We must change our culture to embrace our differences and not use them to humiliate someone else. I believe a diverse group of people will make a community successful and thrive. The truth is we need many different interests, gifts and talents to have a truly great country, one that will lead in areas of technology, business, education and health care. We do not need to like or agree with everyone but we must be respectful and treat everyone with the dignity they deserve.

Our Day 1 Campaign is simple, just visit our website and download the script which states specifically what behaviors, words and actions are acceptable and what are not. Have a leader read the script to the group and get an acknowledgement back from the group that they understand. By verbally calling out and naming specific words and actions that are not acceptable within a certain group, the leader sets the tone and the group understands that this community will be a safe supportive space for everyone.

Upstander Pledge

The next step would be to allow individuals in the group or community to pledge to be an Upstander. An Upstander is someone who stands up and speaks out when they see someone being humiliated, harassed or bullied. Another piece of information that I learned is that in 80% of all bullying situations there are 3 components, the bully, the target, and the bystanders. This was true in Tyler's situation, there were many witnesses called up during the trial and I couldn't help but think, if just one of those people had reached out to Tyler or had reported what was happening, there might have been a very different ending to Tyler's story.

The good news is, this knowledge creates a great opportunity to enable us to change the power dynamics in future bullying situations, as we turn the bystanders into Upstanders. There are several ways someone can become an Upstander, and of course we never ever want anyone to put themselves in harm's way. If the bystander

knows the people involved or they feel safe, they can simply speak up at the time of the incident. Letting the aggressor know that those words, actions or pictures are hurtful and offensive and that they will not be tolerated in this place or space. Sometimes just calling it out can change the tone and atmosphere and is all that is needed. But if that doesn't have impact or if you are not safe speaking up then it is essential to tell a trusted adult and/or a person in authority. Telling is not the same as tattling if the motive is to help and keep someone safe. Most importantly is to speak to the target, especially if you know the target. Make sure the target is safe, and that they know where to go for help and support, as well as letting them know that you are a resource for them if need be.

Steps for Bullying Prevention

The Tyler Clementi Foundation believes that every classroom and institution of higher education can be a safe place to learn and thrive, but in order for that to happen, we need to change the culture in many of these institutions. There may never be a one-size-fits-all solution to the epidemic of bullying. But the simplest and best place to start is to teach and encourage empathy. To encourage people to only do and say what they would want done and said to them. Empathy is one of the best tools we have to make the world a better place.

My personal goal is to change hearts and minds to ignite this culture shift to a society that is empathetic, respectful, considerate and kind but I also understand that sometimes that cannot happen quickly enough without or in isolation of legislation. Legislation is a necessary part of the process to help create that change. Because some people may be blinded or unaware of the harm and pain that is caused by their own biases and prejudices, there is a need for laws that can set a minimum for acceptable behavior and shine a spot light on those injustices and inequalities present on some of our university and college campuses. Federal legislation is urgently needed to help create safe campus climates for all students in higher education across the country.

Because our higher education system is so highly recognized around the world, our colleges and universities attract students from all parts of the world. Students who come with many different thoughts and ideas including ethnic and cultural biases. This further supports the idea that we need to have legislation that will provide a safe campus climate for all students, especially the most vulnerable.

Federal Legislation

My request of you today is simple, I urge you to include **The Tyler Clementi Higher Education Anti-Harassment Act** in the reauthorization of the higher education act. The Tyler Clementi Higher Education Anti-Harassment Act would

- 1- Initiate, expand and/or improve programs that prevent the harassment of students
- 2- Provide counseling to targets and perpetrators
- 3- Educate and train students, faculty and staff about ways to prevent or address harassment
- 4- Promote ongoing research as to what is the best methods to combat this epidemic

I believe this bill will allow institutions of higher education to take a fresh look and reexamine their policies and procedures that are and are not in place. In addition this legislation is your opportunity to not only keep our own young adults safe but to also have a global influence. Book knowledge is important but the wisdom of empathy and compassion is priceless.

Bullying does not magically disappear when someone turns 18. We must continue to provide safe and supportive learning environments for all students in all learning environments including higher education. The time is now, we can't let Tyler's story continue to repeat itself. Action must be taken now because there have been far too many Tyler's already. Thank you.

REFERENCES

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