

## You're Still Bullying...Really?

By: Kevin Hines

I was relentlessly bullied from the earliest days of grade school that I can remember. I was thrown to the ground, picked back up and punched in the gut by schoolyard bullies. I was taunted and--due to my mixed-race background-- called things like "little red nigger." They threw balls-- baseballs, basketballs, volleyballs and footballs-- at my head. I got good at ducking out of the way or even catching them unexpectedly mid-air. It turned into a sixth sense.

I was "noogied" (when a bully-- or an older brother-- puts you in a headlock, clenches a fist and grinds their knuckles across the top of your head until you scream from the friction.) But the names they called me were awful and the sense of belittlement they caused, torture. "Kevin, you're an idiot!" Or, "I'm so glad I'm not as stupid or as ugly as you!" Or, "Hey, Kevin, what's your major malfunction...dumbass!" And every sort of variation you probably don't want to imagine. And, I can tell you from experience that each remark starts to sound the same after years of those sorts of taunts and abuse.

In fact, my entire life has been affected by those remarks.

As a kid, I developed a very serious inferiority complex. In my freshman year of high school, the bullying continued. By then, I had begun to believe the remarks. I believed I was stupid, ugly and useless. Thanks to my mother, I was able to bounce back rather effectively and quickly from each situation. She told me things like: "They only have power if you give it to them."

In grade school, she would graciously help by putting little notes in my lunch bag. They were notes of encouragement and empowerment. She has a magic touch when it comes to making a dismal day brighter. However, the bullying continued. I was either "too Mexican-looking" or "too dark to be Irish" or "too East Indian" to sit at one or another table at lunch. One guy told everyone I had "Chinese fingernails" and that a disgrace. (What does that even *mean*? I asked myself at the time.)

In one of my Spanish classes, there were these two "barbarian" seniors who had to take the class over. I didn't learn anything that entire semester because they spent the entire hour harassing and hazing me. They punched, kicked and threw me face-down into garbage cans. This continued until I finally put a stop to it in my sophomore and junior years of high school.

Unlike a movie scene, I didn't stop the bullying by fighting back and emerging triumphant. I didn't even stop it by arguing or yelling. I stopped it in a much more subtle and interesting way: I became "kinda cool." It was something I never thought would happen, but little 5'2 Kevin Hines became somewhat, than increasingly popular. It happened, in part, because I found my sense of humor and became "funny."

I played sports and won a first-place JV wrestling medal. I acted in school plays and musicals (hey, look at the hit-show, "Glee"-- it is *totally* cool now!) I even got to play a

year of football, and the team protected one-another. I will ever forget the day when two like-minded hooligans attempted to throw me in another garbage bin on a game day. As they approached me, three of my large and strong teammates came down the hallway to rescue me, declaring that I was not to be hassled ever again. I was finally in the “in” crowd... at least one of them.

But it seemed that just as my luck was shifting, my brain started giving way and its chemistry shifted immensely. I would be diagnosed with bipolar disorder before my junior year ended. And, two years after my diagnosis, I attempted to die by suicide. I can't--and won't-- say that bullying caused my attempt on my own life, but I believe it played a role.

On the day of my attempt, I felt that my brain was trying to kill me as I did everything I could to stay alive. I was 19-years old and it was the year 2000 when I jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge. It was and is the biggest mistake of my life. It is still something I still regret.

At the moment of my attempt, I was without rational thought and any number of things could have led me to that bridge. I was not only the bullying. Yes, bullying had shaped my adult life; yes, it played a role; and yes, it hindered my mental growth. It also shattered the perception I had of myself and created terrible inner-demons and self-destructive thoughts. This created an angry inner dialogue that lasted for years before the jump. So, yes, bullying played a role.

However, there is no substantive evidence in the mental health and suicide prevention community which claims a causal connection between bullying and suicide among younger populations. However, I do believe that it affects one's state of mind which *could* lead to a suicide. Especially this new form of bullying: cyber-bullying.

So, what do we do to avoid consequences that-- if not caused directly by bullying-- nonetheless leave scars of low and/or distorted self esteem on our youth?

When I speak to an audience of students, I encourage each audience member to try and realize that every individual around them-- in front of them, next to them, behind them-- has feelings No matter who we are, no matter if you are looking directly into the eyes of the biggest “Jock” in the room-- we all have feelings. When hurtful words are spoken or causative painful actions are taken, we can be hurt. I tell students that they don't have to get along with-- or befriend-- everyone. But, we can and should respect that everyone has feelings and those feelings can be easily destroyed.

Following my very first public speaking presentation in 2001 at the grade school I had attended, I received letters from that 120-member audience which stated in some way that the writer had gone to those they knew that had hurt in the past and apologized. The teachers from this school also told me that they watched several students approach each other and make amends after my presentation.

Not only is bullying unnecessary, it is harmful... and it may play a role in someone dying by suicide. If one speech can make students recognize the humanity in each other, what can millions of great teachers, speakers and students around the world do for change? Well, we can do a lot with the simple, daily reminders that kindness and compassion may, one day, save many lives.