

For Justin

A mom takes on her son's bullies, in school and on the school board

Shawn and Tammy Aaberg didn't set out to be activists. Shawn just wanted to keep carrying the mail in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota as he always had, coming home to his wife, Tammy, and their three sons each day.

But on July 9, 2010, Tammy called Shawn, a member of Minneapolis Branch 9, at work and told him he had to come home immediately because she had found their middle son, Justin, dead in his room.

"I came racing home," he said. "The police wouldn't let me in, and I had to sit in the back yard for quite a while."

Tammy had come home after buying a new pet, a chinchilla, for the boys. At 2 p.m., Justin still hadn't gotten out of bed, and his door was locked. Forcing their way in, Tammy

and Justin's younger brother, Anthony, and older brother, Andrew, found Justin dead in his room. He had hanged himself.

That was the day Shawn and his family were personally touched by a problem with a growing prominence nationwide: bullying, and the tragic consequences that sometimes follow.

Once dismissed as just a fact of life for children and teens, bullying has attracted national attention from the media, government and schools. Bullying involves more than violence or threats of violence. Most bullying incidents involve hateful taunts. Social media sites such as Facebook have made anonymous harassment through the Internet—known as "cyberbullying"—easier than ever. According to national surveys of schoolchildren, 42 percent report being bullied through the Internet, and 35 percent were threatened.

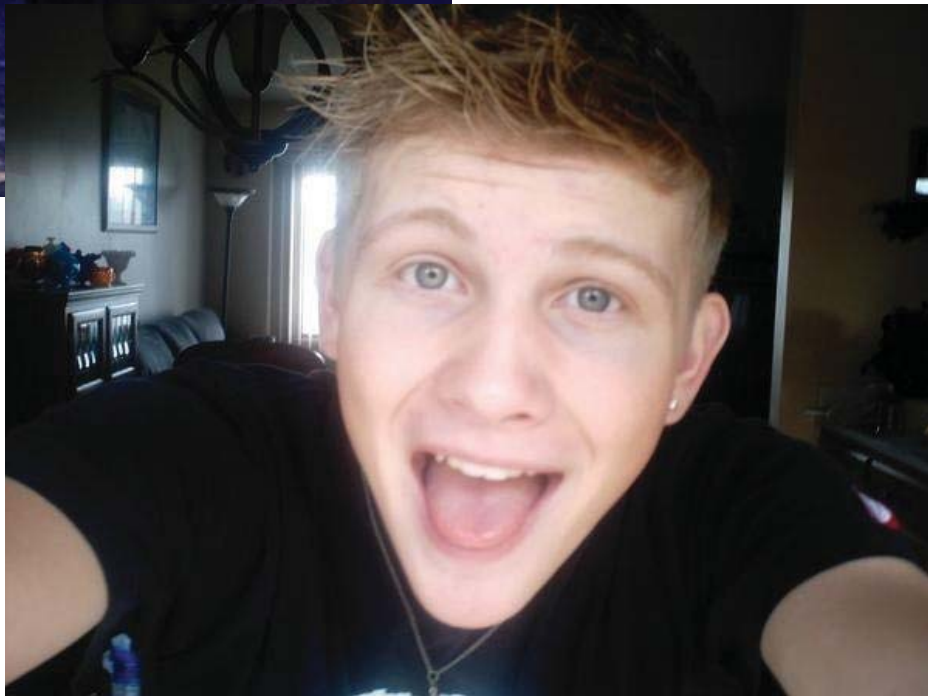
A growing awareness that bullying can lead to serious consequences, including suicide, has fueled the attention, and authorities and parents are realizing that leaving children feeling powerless to stop it makes bullying widespread, sometimes with tragic consequences.

The Aabergs had little warning that their family would become victims of bullying. They soon learned just how widespread the problem was in their community. What they didn't anticipate was how hard it would be to get authorities to do something about it.

'Suicide cluster'

At age 15, Justin knew he was gay. What he didn't know yet was just how hard it would be to live as a gay teen in his town.

Justin was a good student at Anoka High School who enjoyed playing the





Above: Justin Aaberg
Below: Minneapolis, Branch 9 member
Shawn Aaberg with wife, Tammy.

cello and composing his own songs. He had friends and seemed happy. He had declared to his parents that he was gay a year earlier, and they accepted it. But life at school wasn't as easy.

When he died, he hadn't left Tammy or Shawn with any evidence that he was upset enough to take his own life. "Up to then, we thought things were going really well," Shawn said. They had known about some harassment Justin had faced, but only after his death did Justin's friends tell his parents the full extent of the problems he had experienced in school.

That's also when Shawn and Tammy learned about the other suicides.

In November 2009, a student at a school in the Anoka-Hennepin School District had taken her own life. Several more suicides followed, including Justin's. The Aabergs learned about the suicides that had happened before Justin's, and then they watched in horror with the rest of the community as more students took their own lives, bringing the total to nine in a 15-month period. The events prompted mental health experts to label the district a "suicide cluster"—a place where an unusually high number of suicides had happened, and might be linked. At least four of the students were known to have been bullied specifically because they were gay or thought to be gay.

The bullying dished out to some of these students was relentless and cruel. A schoolmate had created a Facebook page titled "I Hate ____" devoted just to insulting and taunting one suicide victim. After another shot herself, a few students asked her best friend if she had seen her splattered

brains, and urged the friend to shoot herself, too.

Shawn Aaberg says he thinks Justin was aware of the other suicides but never spoke of his own suicidal thoughts. "I think Justin knew," he said. "He kind of kept it to himself. He didn't think we would do anything, or could do anything."

"I thought everything was OK," Tammy added. She grew up in Minneapolis and had never seen bullying like this in her school or church.

What really stung was learning that some adults had joined in the harassment of Justin.

"I remember three months before he died, a kid told him he would go to hell because he was gay," Tammy said. Tammy told him it wasn't true, because God loved everybody. It wasn't just a chance comment—a religious group had sponsored an event that encouraged students to wear anti-gay T-shirts to school and speak out against homosexuality. After Justin's death, a friend of Justin's told her that parents had made similar comments to Justin. "I didn't know the extent of it," Tammy said. "When I found that out, I just lost it."

Justin's parents also learned that the school board had set a policy of "neutrality" for teachers and school staff when issues of sexual orientation came up in school, which the Aabergs saw as a barrier to protecting students from bullying. The neutrality policy, they said, confused teachers and staff and discouraged them from confronting problems that involved sexuality, including bullying. The Aabergs also thought that the school's anti-bullying policy was too generic, with no specific





The Aabergs created the non-profit group Justin's Gift to help local kids find a safe place to be themselves. Pictured above: Members of the group marched in a gay pride parade.

explanation of what behavior wasn't acceptable. When bullying happens and adults in charge do nothing about it, this sends a message that it is OK, Tammy Aaberg said. The result is a "culture of bullying" that leaves victims feeling isolated and helpless.

Tammy thinks the neutrality policy contributed to Justin's isolation. A school counselor had once found Justin crying in the hallway after two boys had grabbed his crotch and asked if he liked it. Justin hadn't told his parents of the incident, afraid of getting in more trouble with the boys. Other students told the counselor the details. The counselor later said that, even before the incident, she had put Justin at the top of her "worry list." But the counselor never told Tammy about the incident, or about the counselor's concerns about his safety. It's unclear why the school did nothing in that case, but Tammy points to the school board's neutrality policy. "Once she heard the word 'gay,' [the counselor] didn't ask Justin's friends any further questions and I never received a phone call," she said.

"I think I at least deserved the right to know that my son was physically and sexually assaulted at school."

A brick wall

Alarmed by the suicide problem and the neutrality policy, the Aabergs went to the Anoka-Hennepin school board.

"I honestly thought that when I went I was going to explain," Tammy said, "and they'd say, 'Oh, let us work with you.'" But the school board didn't make the connection between the policy and bullying.

"It was like talking to a brick wall," Shawn said.

The school board denied that its policies had anything to do with the

suicides, and it dug in its heels with the urging of a group that calls itself the Parents Action League (PAL), based in nearby Champlin, MN.

"It's not a very large group. They just have a big mouth," Tammy Aaberg said. "They come to meetings and say crazy things about gay people. You could tell that the school board, all except one guy, were all on the side of PAL."

PAL has tried for many years to push the school district to adopt policies such as informing students about therapies they say can "cure" homosexuality. The group claims efforts to confront bullying in schools are actually an attempt to promote homosexuality. The Southern Poverty Law Center has labeled PAL a hate group.

As was the case with the student who was told to kill herself like her friend did, the comments about Justin did not soften after his death. A PAL activist blamed anti-bullying efforts for Justin's suicide, reasoning that he wouldn't have been bullied if he had simply held back his gay identity or tried to change it. A spokesman for an anti-gay group affiliated with PAL blamed Justin for his suicide, since, he claimed, gays are prone to killing themselves.

Once Tammy observed how the school board meetings were going, she spoke up. She said that parents representing PAL at school board meetings were using the same intimidating tactics bullies use, such as blaming the victims for their persecution—even with young bullying victims there in the room to hear the comments. Her complaints were ignored.

"I was really hurt" by the school board experience, she said. "To this day, they have not said, 'I'm sorry for your loss.'"

The story soon garnered national attention, partly because of the growing public awareness of bullying issues, but also because of the connection to Rep. Michele Bachmann (R-MN).

Bachmann, who was running for the GOP presidential nomination as

the controversy unfolded, represents the Anoka-Hennipen area in Congress. She had attended Anoka High, Justin's school. And she was well-known for her outspoken views on gay issues, such as her claims that public schools in Minnesota were on the verge of teaching students to try homosexuality, starting in kindergarten.

Tammy isn't an outspoken woman. But before she knew it, Justin's story was a national story, and she was quoted in newspapers and appearing on national television shows, including "Larry King Live."

"I was not a person who liked to be public," she said. "I'm getting more used to it." She has learned to talk through the tears.

Tammy testified in Washington, DC, before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. She lobbied on Capitol Hill and met with Department of Education officials. She delivered a petition with 141,000 signatures to Rep. Bachmann that urged her to address bullying, and met with her staff. She joined Sen. Al Franken (D-MN) at a news conference to introduce the Student Non-Discrimination Act, which would outlaw discrimination in public schools based on actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, and forbid schools from ignoring harassment. Franken was inspired by Justin's story to introduce the bill.

"Please put aside politics or personal beliefs," Tammy said, urging Congress to pass the bill. "Do the right thing for our children."

As national attention grew, Tammy kept pushing the school board to act. Finally, under pressure from a U.S. Department of Justice investigation and lawsuits, the Anoka-Hennepin school board voted 5-1 in March to change the neutrality policy and implement new efforts to prevent bullying and suicide.

Tammy isn't quite satisfied with the results, though. For one thing, the school board left her off of a

25-member task force formed to recommend additional anti-bullying policies—but named a member of PAL to the panel. And she thinks the new policy doesn't go far enough. The school board chairman wrote in a letter to a local newspaper that the new policy maintained the intent of the old one, and was rewritten only to be easier to defend in court.

While she was sharing Justin's story with a national audience, Tammy was also working to save youngsters like him back home, one at a time. She founded Justin's Gift, a non-profit group that offers a "safe place for youth" to be themselves and to develop pride and self-confidence. Justin's Gift sponsors social events and offers resources and services for gay and lesbian youths. The group, Tammy said, helps young people "know there are people out there who care for them."

"My son was a very kind, gentle spirit who helped make the world a better place," she said, "and I believe he would have continued to do so if he had been given the chance."

While Tammy took on her new role as an activist, Shawn found solace in delivering the mail. "For me it was harder" to go to meetings or trips like Tammy, he said. "I still had to work." Justin's death was difficult to talk about, he said. The old routine of his route, though, made it easier. "You get back to work and it's not on your mind 24/7."

His co-workers also helped him deal with his loss. "They were all really supportive. They came to the wake.

"Everybody knows everyone at work. It's like a family." **PR**



Tammy and Shawn have worked to make sure that what happened to Justin and the other kids at his school doesn't happen elsewhere.

Top: She joined Sen. Al Franken (D-MN) to promote the Student Non-Discrimination Act.

Above: She's also appeared on "Larry King Live" and lobbied other leaders, like Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), to get their support.