

COMM

CALL TO THE CAUSE



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A CRY FOR HELP

By Kirk Smith

Turn on the TV news, visit any news website, or open up a newspaper on any given day and you are bound to find a story that relates to bullying. Every day we see and hear heartbreaking stories of young people being physically and emotionally tortured by their peers, so much so that many bullies are landing in jail, while their victims are being scared, killed or committing suicide. It's a sad reality in every community, in every city and town. Face-to-face, behind closed doors, throughout cyberspace...bullying knows no boundaries and affects millions of children every day.

When I was a child, I had to repeat the third grade. Why? Because I was constantly distracted by the fact that I was going to get beat up on my way home from school. I wanted to succeed in school, but simply couldn't focus, knowing that my bullies would be waiting for me as soon as the dismissal bell rang. Some days I escaped without physical harm, while other days the beatings were brutal. Either way I was an emotional wreck and, for many years, success in school was not my focus. I wanted to fit in. I wanted to be cool. I wanted to be able to walk home without constantly looking over my shoulders.

Did I have hatred for the boys who were tormenting me? Absolutely. But when I reflect on that time, I realize that those bullies drove me to be a better person. Throughout my childhood and teenage years, they constantly told me that I wasn't "cool enough" to hang out with them, sell drugs and drop out of school, so I began to believe those things. Looking

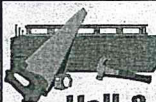
back, I actually credit them with chasing me away from that life. By the grace of God, I had a loving mother and the support of some good mentors to pull me through the tough years. Although I can't say with certainty what happened to my bullies, I'd be willing to bet that their "cool" lifestyle most likely landed them in jail, on the streets, or worse.

But, here's the real question: What might have happened if someone reached out to *them*? How might my childhood *and* theirs been different if someone had reached out to these guys to find out what was driving them? Just as my failing third grade was a cry for help, couldn't the same be said for their torturous behavior?

As difficult as it is for most of us to empathize with a bully, it's really what we need to do if we are going to put an end to the pain affecting millions of children and young adults. How do we do this? We need to start by giving our youth a reason to succeed. Prove to them that — good or bad — their actions today will shape their futures.

This cannot be done without the presence of caring, compassionate adult role models. Just as we can teach the victims of bullies that their lives have value and that they deserve respect and kindness from others, we cannot assume that bullies are incapable of change.

Don't wait for conversations surrounding the challenges facing today's kids to be initiated by the kids themselves. Ask yourselves how you can be the person who builds a brighter future for a youth who's crying out for help. ■



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