

WITHOUT WARNING

12-year-old girl's suicide creates agonizing questions

JUSTIN MURPHY @CITIZENMURPHY Three months after 12-year-old Kennis Cady died by suicide, her parents have more questions than ever could be answered. Why did she do it? Was she bullied, for what, and when? What did the adults at East Rochester Junior/Senior High School do to help and what will they do now for other students, her three brothers among them? At the bottom of everything, though, perhaps the key to it all: What is Kazumi? Or, why did she feel so all alone? Kennis was a quirky girl and proud of it. Somewhere along the way — her parents do not know how — she developed a passion for Japanese culture. When she got to choose the restaurant, it was sushi. When she had free time to read, it was likely manga, the Japanese comics. And when she made her own drawings, as she often did for hours at a time, giggling and chattering to herSee **SUICIDE, Page 20A**



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Dan and Michaela Cady visit the grave of their daughter Kennis, who took her life this summer at the age of 12. They brought a sunflower and seashells to place at her headstone at White Haven Memorial Park in Pittsford.

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Suicide

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self in her room, she would create Japanese- style characters who sometimes spoke with her or for her.

Her father found one such cartoon in her room shortly after she died. It was more of a poem than a cartoon, in fact: a simple frowning face, tears welling in the exaggerated eyes, accompanied by 15 unrhymed lines.

It is titled "Kazumi."

"People don't really care to talk to people who are kazumi because they are different and creative and not like everyone else AND they refuse to live in the shadows of everyone else," it reads. "It's not fair to everyone different. Just because we're different, we are not outcasts!"

Her parents knew she was upset with how two classmates were treating her. They noticed she had spent more time in her room the previous few weeks. They felt she would benefit from speaking to a therapist and had begun searching for one.

They did not know she would ever harm herself. They suspect she didn't know it either, until it was too late.

There was no suicide note. All Kennis Cady left behind was a word that really doesn't explain anything at all. *** The Cady family moved to East Rochester's leafy Forest Hills neighborhood three years ago when Dan Cady took a job here after 22 years in the Air Force.

For that reason and others, Kennis did not have a wide circle of friends, but she did make some acquaintances at a small pond down the road from her home.

There was the mallard she named Clementine, and then there were the toads. She gave them names and fed them bugs she caught around the back porch lights. The largest was Mabel, and it ate from her hand.

"I would describe her as fearless, but at the same time sensitive," Dan Cady, her father, said. "She was very delicate about her friendships. ... She invested heavily emotionally in people. To her, a friend was something deeper than what a 12-year-old would normally think."

At school, the girl who named toads and drew Japanese cartoons gravitated toward other children who didn't easily fit in for reasons of their own. She played computer games with them after school and sat with them at lunch despite the inevitable middle-school judgments that followed.

"I told her, 'Maybe you should try to kind of assimilate with the rest of the class and try to make other friends,' " her mother, Michaela Cady, said. "But she said, 'No, I'm not going to leave my friends.' ... She saw herself as an outsider and she was proud. She wasn't going to conform or change who she was."

Despite that pride, Kennis had periodic problems throughout her years in East Rochester with apparent mistreatment by some classmates. It worsened beginning in the late winter, according to her parents.

Some of the allegations are detailed by her parents as well as a brief report by the Monroe County Sheriff's Office after her death. They center in particular on two girls, active in sports and with nearly 8,000 Instagram followers between them.

A carton of chocolate milk was dumped on her in the cafeteria, but no one was punished. When she stood up for a friend who was being targeted, a rumor was started that she was a lesbian, in a relationship with that friend. That rumor then made it onto a fake Instagram account that apparently was later deleted.

On one occasion, Kennis' mother had to pick her up early from school because she was distraught and would not speak with a social worker.

Even after school let out for the summer, Kennis wasn't herself, her parents said. She was spending more time in her room and was reluctant to leave the house.

On July 20, she went with her parents to the pet store. She saw a cat up for adoption and begged to take it home.

She didn't have any friends, she said. The cat could be her friend.

"At that point, for the first time, I really saw there was something troubling her different from regular childhood stuff," Dan Cady said. "She started crying and said she was sad, and I said, 'Why are you sad?' and she said, 'I don't know.' Michaela and I had a talk that night about getting her help. ... We didn't realize that within 48 hours we'd lose our daughter."

Two days later, one of Kennis' brothers wanted to go to the community pool and Michaela asked Kennis to take him. She responded with an extended tantrum unlike anything her mother had seen before.

"For 30 minutes she was screaming: 'I don't want to go to the pool, you must not love me if you're making me go to the pool, I do not

want to see (the two girls),' " Michaela Cady recounted. "She went on and on, screaming. To me, that was very alarming."

Exasperated, she sent Kennis to her room and told her she was not allowed to use her computer. Once Kennis' door was closed, Michaela called her husband at work to try to decide what to do next.

"I told her, 'Go get her out of her room and talk to her,' " Dan recalled. "I said, 'Let's take her somewhere, do something, dig into this.' " Five minutes had elapsed. She hung up the phone and knocked on Kennis' door. No answer. She opened it.

The gregarious, compassionate, silly 12-year-old girl had tied her pajama bottoms to the bed frame, tightened the other end around her neck and slouched to the floor.

"When something like this happens, it hits you in the worst possible way," Dan Cady said. "You owe it to your child to protect them, even from themselves."

"I would compel every parent to listen to these words: There could be no warning signs. It could be your child that's next." *** For seven days, Kennis lay comatose at Golisano Children's Hospital. She never regained consciousness, but her friends and family had a chance to say goodbye and they believe she heard them.

At the moment she died July 29, several other people were being prepared for surgery. They got her kidneys, her liver, her heart valves. The Cadys hope to meet those people some day.

Donating Kennis' organs was their way of following what they believed would have been her wishes. For the same reason, their goal now is to ensure no other East Rochester children face the same trouble that led, at least in part, to Kennis taking her life.

"They can't help Kennis now. Kennis is at peace," Dan Cady said. "But our loss is eternal, until we hope to see her again one day. What we want now is a better environment for children."

Among those to visit Kennis in the hospital was Mark Linton, who at that time was just three weeks into his tenure as superintendent of the East Rochester Union Free School District. Since Kennis' death, Linton and the Cadys have spent hours discussing the incident and what will come next for the school.

Their common goal: to cut through the pain and confusion surrounding Kennis' death and make changes at the school that will benefit other students. It has not been easy.

"People want an answer in these situations," Linton said. "And sometimes it's not just one answer. Sometimes it's very complex."

The district recently finished an internal investigation into its handling of the situation and, more generally, "current practices ... in the arena of addressing student behavior," Linton said.

The investigation found no evidence that anyone bullied Kennis or that the district had been aware of any specific problems and failed to act. According to the school's interviews with students, parents and staff, many of the alleged bullying incidents occurred at nonschool events like parties or non-school sports practices, Linton said. He said it would be unfair to portray the two girls as the perpetrators of Kennis' death.

"When administrators heard these two names (after Kennis' death), they were very surprised," he said. "These two kids are very under-the-radar. They would not have been picked out of a lineup (as bullies)."

After Kennis' death, though, four of her classmates readily identified the two girls as having picked on Kennis and others in interviews with the sheriff's investigator. The classmates said they gave Kennis dirty looks, mocked her in gym class and had un-invited her from a party, and claimed they were the ones behind the lesbian rumor and malicious Instagram activity. In interviews in late July with their principal and with the sheriff's investigator, both girls denied having started the fake Instagram account and said they had never heard of the rumor that Kennis was a lesbian.

"(Responding officer) pointed out it was odd that every other girl (in the class) had heard of the lesbian rumor except both of the two girls accused of starting it," the report reads, using the same language in summarizing each girl's interview. "At that point (she) began to cry and had no answer for that inconsistency."

Dan Cady said he and his wife approached the school three times with concerns about how Kennis was being treated, but the school did not follow up.

"The reason they didn't know is they didn't look into anything," he said. "... If they'd looked into the three complaints we made, they

would have led them to those two girls.”

Principal Casey van Harssel said it is inaccurate to say the school ignored the family’s concerns. He said social workers had been working with the Cadys, though the family denies there was any meaningful follow-up.

The sheriff’s office closed its investigation without any arrests, in part because it was unable to gather any firsthand information about the alleged bullying incidents. It did not respond to a request for further explanation of how it investigates bullying incidents.

The girls’ families did not respond to requests for comment. The families have not been identified because the girls are minors. *** The Cadys recognize that Kennis ultimately made her own decision and hope the two girls in question aren’t traumatized by her death. But they believe bullying was enough of a factor that the school should have known about it and stepped in sooner.

“The consequences of bullying aren’t always obvious to people, but this went on long enough that it resulted in the degradation of our daughter’s state of mind ... to the point she took her life,” Dan Cady said. “They’re 12-year-olds. They need to receive counseling. They need to understand what they did. But the biggest problem I have isn’t with the 12-year-olds. It’s with the parents and the school and the lack of action in what they did.”

There have been a spate of incidents over the last 10 years across the country where teenagers have died by suicide after being bullied at school. Among the most prominent was Jamey Rodemeyer, a 14-year-old Erie County boy who was targeted because he was gay.

Partly in response to these and other incidents, New York and other states passed laws that, among other things, laid out guidelines on bullying and mandated reporting from each school.

New York’s Dignity for All Students Act (DASA), enacted in 2010, requires districts to file a report with the state on any “material incidents of discrimination and/or harassment on school grounds or at a school function.”

There have been some changes made in East Rochester. According to a Sept. 18 letter to parents, social workers and support services have been realigned so that each building has dedicated staff, and employees received additional instruction on DASA protocols and ways to improve communication about instances of misbehavior.

The internal investigation also considered how well the school followed its DASA reporting requirements — in particular, the responses of the adults who knew there was a problem. It found no specific wrongdoing, Linton said.

In the first two school years that districts were required under DASA to report instances of bullying or discrimination to the state, East Rochester, like several other districts, reported zero. On a separate form for violent and disruptive incidents, it reported nine instances in grades K-12 in 2012-13 and seven in 2013-14 .

The Cadys intend to file a notice of claim to preserve their right to sue the district, though they’re not sure what that would accomplish. They wonder what exactly it means to fight on Kennis’ behalf.

For better and for worse, news travels fast around East Rochester’s one square mile. The Cadys have a big box of letters and cards from Kennis’ classmates, friends and teachers as well as strangers.

One came from another young girl who said she, too, felt suicidal. Her parents were stunned to find out.

Kennis’ younger brother blames himself for having asked to go to the pool. He wants to be a nurse after seeing the loving care his sister received at Golisano.

The family took a week’s vacation about a month after Kennis died. Dan Cady counted heads in the car and panicked for a moment. He thought he was missing one.

“There’s times when I try to have peace with it — I really try,” he said. “And there’s times I just feel empty.”

He doesn’t believe there was anything the family could have done differently. Neither does his wife. But still she remembers Kennis’ last words: If her mother loved her, she wouldn’t make her go to the pool.

“Had I known about this whole drama and Instagram and everything, I never would have made her go to the pool,” she said. “I would have given her a hug and told her: ‘I love you, and I’m sorry this is happening to you.’ ” JMURPHY7@Gannett.com



Dan and Michaela Cady visit the grave of their daughter, Kennis, at White Haven Memorial Park in Pittsford.

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