

# Finding Their Way

In response to a *Quintessential New Trier* magazine feature about Elyssa's Mission, a New Trier Township High School alumna and former substitute teacher shares her own story of tragedy and triumph.

*Editor's Note: This piece came to us in the form of a letter to the editor from a reader who shall remain anonymous. We thought it was too important, and too relevant, to our community, not to share in its entirety.*

After reading one of your articles, I was compelled to respond. I am an overly private person but felt the need to share my story in hopes of helping a reader.

Freshly out of university, I landed a temporary full-time job at New Trier Township High School for a teacher on paternity leave. My first day was the announcement of the tragic death of Elyssa Meyers. Ironically, I had to prepare lesson plans for *The Awakening*. That day, I was painfully reminded of my elementary friend's suicide attempt in college.

We were Trevians, too.

When I was growing up on the North Shore, the biggest joke was that every student had a psychiatrist by the time they reached high school. But I laughed and said, "It ain't me, babe. No, no, no, it ain't me, babe."

I've enjoyed the privilege of the New Trier name brand after graduation more so than my university's alumni status. Certain doors opened automatically, given that I had the right qualifications. Surviving school on the North Shore was another story.

The humiliation of not being popular was extreme, including being teased for walking funny, talking funny, acting funny, dressing funny, eating funny, wearing your hair funny, looking funny and smelling funny.

The "others" would be called nerd, dork, bitch, queer — sometimes sexually abused by peers, rumors a-flying —

basically singling out people who were not in the popular group. The perpetrators are not necessarily innately bad as individuals; it was a sick game as to how far they could go without facing consequences, which for the victims, often seem to be limitless. It was the *Lord of the Flies* book we read in high school. The cruelty was real, and the psychological scars were inflicted, but no one said anything to stop it, and sometimes peers encouraged the cruelty for the fear that they, too, might be the subject of ridicule. I was in the popular group, but fell out of favor in a bad way. I could never watch *90210*. All I had to do was show up to school, but I could not turn it off.

My teachers at New Trier were exceptional, however. They saved me. Ninety-nine percent of my teachers really cared about my academic success and more importantly about me. Their teaching style was in line with Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences well before it was the method of choice in schools. They encouraged creativity with academic excellence. They reached out when I extended my hand, including Ms. Tabak, Mr. Provow, Ms. Ambrozik just to name a few exceptional people. I vividly remember their stories and their wisdom which I cherish today. When I taught high school, I made sure I was always available per chance a student would walk in for history help, but walk out with something more. I reminded my students that there is life outside of the confines of high school and the suburbs.

On the first day of teaching at New Trier, I was pained to learn Ms. Meyers committed suicide. "She succeeded," I cried uncontrollably at home after my first day as a sub. It brought me back to the time when my elementary-school friend almost took

her own life. She failed. Ten years to that day, I asked her point blank at Northbrook Court, if I had picked up the phone would she have attempted, and she said probably not. I admit now that my plate was full then, and I didn't want to listen to her voice message that day, especially when my roommate and I just returned from a party. My elementary friend and I were at different colleges at any rate. But had I known, of course, I would have called her right away. It took me about 12 years to let go of that guilt. Now she has a great family and husband due to her failed attempt.

So I laughed at the joke — no way, not me. In my late 20s, I found myself at Dr. Shrink's office. Sometimes, I walked away feeling good because I made her feel even better. It was satisfactory at the time. Then one day, I was living the successful career life in NYC. On more than one occasion, I looked down at the guards dressed in blue baret uniforms from the open bathroom window on the 10th floor with the sun blaring into my eyes. I had been struggling with depression since high school, and it was getting worse year after year. There was nothing I could do to stop it from taking over my feelings and my life. The dream job as it turns out was not what it was supposed to be.

Jaded and beaten down by life, I returned to my parents' house as a total failure back on the North Shore. I blew off my teaching tenure year for the NYC gig. I was supposed to get married. I just couldn't subject him to my mental breakdown, and I knew I hung onto him for the wrong reasons — literally for dear life — so I broke it off. I took anti-depressants, which made it worse. Not that I don't believe in them. They work well for some people, like my



## Out of the Darkness...

A daughter's tragedy is a Northfield mother's triumph.

The Elyssa Meyers story

by David Rutter

*"I believe we create our own path. Faith in God will help guide us, but it is I who lifts my foot and takes another step. We take what we want from life and make it what we choose. Our choices determine our life. One of the hardest concepts is that once we do something, we can't take it back. No matter what we say or do afterward, what's done is done. Everything is so permanent. With that knowledge my outlook on life changes. It all comes down to one simple thing: I don't want to mess up."*

— Elyssa Meyers from her journal entry "Real"

ELYSSA MEYERS WAS 16 when she stood at the precipice of existence and eternity.

She was deciding whether the joy in her life — and there was joy — was enough to balance the pain. And there was pain. She had thought of it often. She had thought of suicide often.

The edge of this psychic Grand Canyon is the loneliest place in the world. There is no light. No warmth. No hope.

And then she could see no way out of the darkness. The hidden pain of her life was too much. The cyber bullying by schoolmates. The torments. The malicious gossip. The malevolent juvenile plots. The clinical depression that stalked her since she was a young child. The depression that even medicine couldn't stop. Life had become a predator to her soul.

It only seemed as though she had defenses against the predator. She did not.

And then she gave up.

She killed herself in her family's Northfield home. It was Feb. 11, 2004.

The ripples that spread after a child's death extend eternally in all directions, as waves from a rock tossed into a quiet pool. The loss never goes away, and the grief seems permanent. Such losses are too profound to be clearly understood. The parent who loses a young child to suicide suffers the ultimate violation of human rights. It changes everything that life was supposed to be.

Joanne Meyers wasn't sure she could endure the loss and the heartbreak of her daughter's death. The anger. Or even the guilt. But if the wound of that day would be eternal, Joanne Meyers promised herself that the lessons of that day must be equally abiding and immutable. She could save herself only by saving

others if she could. It was the least she owed to Elyssa. And to herself. There could be no compensation for the loss; but there might be redemption.

So she set about healing herself by healing others. There is virtual certainty that some teenagers are alive on the North Shore now because of that healing.

That's how Elyssa's Mission got started.

### The Perfect Child

Elyssa was the first of Joanne and Alan's three daughters. Even after the years since Elyssa's death, Joanne finds comfort in remembering how special her daughter was. She clings to it. She would have been 23 this spring, likely a college graduate, deeply involved in her own charity work and ready to bloom as a young professional. Elyssa was a buoyant beacon at New Trier Township High.

Indeed, remembering Elyssa is one of the positive side effects of Elyssa's Mission, an interventionist teaching foundation that places the perils of suicide squarely in front of teens and allows them to see themselves in the reflection. The Mission has counseled more than 10,000 students in 30 school districts along Lake Michigan. This is Joanne's work. This is her triumph.

But as the years slide past, Elyssa will seem less real to more people. Joanne Meyers doesn't want her daughter to be just a historical symbol, even in a good cause.

Elyssa Meyers was too special for that.

"She was such a beautiful girl," her mom says.

"She was incredibly bright and ahead of her time. She was funny, and she made you laugh. She was a thinker. Her writing and

elementary friend.

For almost a year, I stayed in my room and watched television for eight hours straight. What a waste. It was ironic since I didn't own a TV in NYC. My mental state even became worse, and I was going to take my life, but my friend convinced me to seek help — at this point, any kind of help — and she made me promise to do so the following Monday.

I Googled and found, Jennefer, my acupuncturist. It took months of treatment and sometimes she would find me curled up in my car waiting for her arrival to her office in the morning without an appointment.

For two years in a row now, I have a full-time job (granted, with a huge pay cut) and have been on a couple of vacations.

I still go to her for "tune ups." I am by no means perfect. I still struggle and often have flashes of anger unlike the past, but I have more good days than all bad days. I am definitely not as nice as before, but life is manageable and I feel to a certain degree

better than the pre-high school days.

I was always a sensitive child and knew that I had to toughen up. It was and still is never easy. On the other hand, it's time for everyone to say that it is not OK to treat someone like dirt on or off the school grounds and time to say something if anyone sees it — stand up to bullying and not turn a blind eye. I found that lots of bullies were once bullied themselves and sometimes turn out to be even worse bullies than their perpetrators in the work place, but it is not OK — not at all. I implore everyone to say something in defense, even if it is the fear of becoming the subject of ridicule.

Growing up on the North Shore, I understand the challenges students face on a daily basis — pressure to do well in school, absent/overworked parents, along with opportunities to do drugs and go on alcohol binges. There are no limitations unless the students set them for themselves. However, the outcome of New Trier graduates can

be a success, granted these factors can be contained and kept in perspective because of the school's recognition for excellence.

Also, finding something as an outlet through writing, painting or making music, for example, was important. Depression will rob someone of any motivation or desire, but through my writing (even though I really didn't want to do it at the time, I committed myself to do at least 10 minutes of it a day), I documented my story into a book and hope it will be published one day.

Finally, treatments are out there, and one should never give up hope because several attempts were initial failures. I knew that my parents loved me, but they did not know how to help me. Doctors insisted there was nothing wrong with me and told me that I was in the best physical shape of my life, but they couldn't get inside my head. I knew differently because I had to live with the difficult me, but I kept looking and hoping because the alternative was straightforward.