

Please Stop Laughing at Me . . .

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# Bullied Kids Speak Out

*We Survived—How You Can Too*



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 **Adams**media  
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# Dedication

*I dedicate this book to my mom, Joy Blanco, who has put up with me when absolutely no one else would or could, loved me at my best and my worst, inspired me when I was lost, made me macaroni and cheese when I was longing for comfort food, taken care of my dogs, my bunnies, my heart, my soul, and who is the most important person in my life. I love you, Mom. Thanks for all the chats.*

*And to*

*My Aunt Anne in heaven, without whom I couldn't write a word. Not a single word.  
I love you, too.*

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# Introduction

Hi. I'm glad you're here! If we've already met, either through one of my other books or perhaps because I've spoken at your school, it's so cool to see you again. And if this is our first time hanging out, I'm happy that we found each other. I want you to know you're safe here, that you're not alone. We all understand what you're going through. When I was in school, I never thought it would get better. I can still hear my classmates laughing at me. I can still feel the sting of all those parties I never got invited to, the football games on Friday nights I longed to attend but didn't dare because I knew I'd be sitting alone in the bleachers, humiliated and ashamed. Don't even get me started about what it was like in the cafeteria at lunch or in the locker room after gym class. Back then there was no Internet. When I got home from school, I was beyond lonely, but at least no one could mess with me in the sanctity of my own home on a computer or smartphone. Cyber-bullying was a monster of the future, one whose claws hadn't yet scratched, whose teeth hadn't yet bitten. Now that monster is unleashed. It's just one more way the mean kids can break your heart. I know all about feeling broken. I also know what it feels like to survive and come back stronger, smarter, and better than before. So do the kids you'll be meeting here. They never gave up. Some took longer than others, and some made a lot of mistakes before getting it right, but every one of them found a way to stand up to their bullies and reclaim their lives. Not only will they give you hope that you can too, but they'll tell you exactly how they did it.

Welcome home. It's time for you to get to know everyone!

## CHAPTER ONE

# Ethan

My mom found me in the barn after school trying to make a noose out of a piece of rope. She grabbed it out of my hands, screaming, “Oh, my God!” over and over. Would I have gone through with it if she hadn’t caught me? I don’t know. I was desperate. And a few weeks before, I was so happy it was crazy.

I’m sixteen but everyone thinks I’m older ’cause I’m a big dude—not fat but I’ve got a lot of muscles. I’ve always struggled to fit in. A few kids at school are okay to me, but I also get made fun of a lot.

There’s this girl in my class. Her name is Morgan. I crushed on her since middle school. She’s got long blonde hair and awesome green eyes. It took me all semester to get up the nerve to ask her to prom. I’ll never forget that day. I was so scared I almost barfed. I went up to her by her locker and just said it.

“Wanna go to prom with me?”

She probably only took like two seconds to answer but it felt like forever. She said, “Okay, sure.” It was the best moment of my whole, entire life! I started texting everybody I knew. By second period, a lot of the kids from the cool crowd, who normally looked down on me, were high-fiving me in the halls. Seriously, it was unreal. Usually I felt invisible at school. When I told my parents, they were psyched. They totally got how scary it was asking one of the most popular girls in my class to go with me. I didn’t care that she was popular. I would have given anything to take her to prom no matter what. I loved who she was on the inside.

So, like, I really got into planning for this thing. I tried on about a thousand tuxedos to find the coolest one. I Googled a ton of romantic restaurants. I wanted everything to be perfect. I texted my friends with questions. They were like, “Yo, dude, chill.” I couldn’t help it. I was tripping. My parents were even renting me a limo, and my dad bought a new camera so he could take pictures of Morgan and me all dressed up. My parents had never ridden in a limo in their lives, not even when they got hitched. I knew they really couldn’t afford it, but they were so excited for me. I have the best parents on the whole planet.

Then a week before prom, Morgan bailed. She sent me a text that said she couldn't do prom with me 'cause she didn't want to go as someone's "beard." I felt like a total loser 'cause I didn't even know what that meant. I just texted back, "Huh?"

"OMG dude, WTF did you expect after what you posted?" her next message said.

"What post?" I said.

"Seriously?" she said. "Ethan, you like came out to the whole school on FB!"

"I'm not even on FB anymore," I said. "My parents made me get off 'cause my grades sucked."

"Whatever," she said. "You know, I really did like you. You should have told me you were gay. Now I just feel like an idiot."

I kept trying to tell her it wasn't true, that it was some f\_\_\_ed-up joke. I knew she didn't believe me. She texted me that her friends were all laughing at her. I was used to getting picked on. Morgan wasn't. It freaked her out. Everybody was gossiping about it. It all happened so quick. Everybody started calling me fag and homo. I won't even tell you what some asshole wrote across my locker. The same people who had high-fived me before were trashing me now behind my back. One guy spat in my food at lunch, saying fags shouldn't be allowed to eat with everyone else. I could tell some of the other kids felt bad for me, but they were too scared to say anything. I sat alone in the back of the cafeteria. I could see Morgan at her table with her friends. Some of them were still giving her sh\_t. Every once in a while she'd look over at me and then turn away. I never picked on the gay kids at school, but I never stuck up for them. Now I knew exactly how they felt. I wish I had said something when they were getting messed with.

By sixth period, I was so upset that I went to the nurse's office and pretended to be sick so I could go home. When my mom picked me up, she knew something bad happened. That night I told my parents the whole story. Then, we went onto Facebook and found my page. I f\_\_\_ing lost it. Whoever did it really knew what they were doing. Someone at school must have used their phone to take a picture of me in math class. I knew it was in math, 'cause I recognized the background. I started going through faces in my head, trying to figure out who hated me enough to be so mean. I was so pissed off. My "page" had my favorite movies, favorite music, cool stuff I did last summer on vacation. It was like I wrote it. It even *sounded* like me.

My parents kept calling Facebook but they couldn't get a person on the phone. It was like a nightmare only it was real. My mom called the police, the state's attorney's office, the FBI, our lawyer. Everyone said lots of stuff but no one had an answer. The



next morning, she called the principal for a meeting. She said it was an emergency. His secretary treated her like sh\_t, told her it was “anti-bullying week,” and he was busy trying to get ready for the speaker who was coming, that maybe he could see them next week. Mom was pissed. She and my dad got in the car and drove over there. They told the receptionist all they needed was ten minutes with the principal. She said he was in a meeting with the superintendent but that they could wait if they wanted to. My parents sat in that office for three hours. They finally went home. I’ve never seen them that mad.

The FB thing wasn’t any easier to fix. Finally, after a gazillion e-mails back and forth and a letter from our lawyer, Facebook took down the phony page. By then it didn’t matter anymore. Everyone at school still thought I was the one who put it up and that I just wussed out and took it down. Not only was I a “homo,” but I was a coward too.

Kids started shoving me into the lockers. This one group of dudes beat me up by the bleachers. Mom asked me about the bruises. I hated having to tell her. And we still didn’t know who posted the fake page. The school principal wasn’t doing jack. He finally met with my parents and me for twenty minutes, then he sent out a “stern warning” to students about cyber-bullying, and that was that. He said the school couldn’t punish whoever made the page anyway, ’cause it happened off school property. I hated my school. Every day it was the same thing. I’d take as much sh\_t from the other kids as I could, and then I’d go back to the principal, telling him please, you gotta do something. I like begged the dude. He’d promise me he’d take care of it, and then nada.

I kept on hoping that this would all go away and that Morgan would come around, that she’d still go to prom with me. I couldn’t help it. The day of the dance, I wouldn’t even go to the bathroom without my cell phone just in case she called or texted to tell me she changed her mind. By six o’clock, reality hit. It was like that amazing moment when I thought my dream had come true, had been just that. A dream. So I snuck into the barn and reached for the rope. That’s when Mom found me.

A lot has happened since then.

Mom and Dad convinced me that offing myself wasn’t the answer. I can’t believe I let things go that far. They told me it *was* time to take control. For months, the school had been talking about the speaker they were bringing in on bullying. We decided to use it as our opportunity. That morning, we showed up at the principal’s office, since we knew the speaker would have to check in at the main desk. When the principal

came out to meet her, we asked if we could talk to her. We were cool about it, totally respectful. The principal started to say no, but before he could finish, the speaker smiled and put her arm around me. It's like she already got what was going on. Then she said she'd be happy to hear my story. The principal looked like he swallowed a bug. It was awesome! We didn't have much time, since she was scheduled to speak pretty soon. I totally spilled to her. I didn't hold anything back. My parents said some stuff too, but mostly they let me get everything off my chest. I'm not sure if the principal was pretending to give a sh\_t or if he really did. Either way, he had to help me. He knew he couldn't dick us around any longer 'cause now there was a witness from outside school. He asked me if it was okay if he told my story at the next school board meeting. He said it might help convince everyone that the "anti-bullying policies" at our school sucked.

I said sure. Then something else happened that was incredible—I still can't believe it really happened. After the speaker finished her talk at my school, she asked to see me. She said a reporter from a big national newspaper called her. She wanted to know if she knew any kids who got bullied and if they'd talk about it. The speaker wanted to know if she could give this reporter my name and number. I was like, "Way cool!" The reporter called that night. We talked, and then she flew out to meet me and my parents. She interviewed my principal too. A couple of weeks later, I couldn't believe it! Our story made the front page of one of the largest newspapers in the country and it was on some national news websites! The writer talked about how stuff really can get done when kids, parents, and the school work together. There was no way my school could wiggle out of doing something now. My principal, who was freaking about the whole thing in the beginning but then finally took a chill pill and did the interview, called to thank me. He told me that I'd "taught him a valuable lesson about integrity and standing up for what's right even when you're afraid."

Today, the new rules at my school are way better than before, and if a student is being bullied, there's what they call "an accountability process." If a teacher doesn't help they get in trouble. Finally, kids like me have a chance.



*Ethan, you and your parents should be proud of yourselves for never giving up. I'm relieved they were able to help you understand that suicide is never the answer. Your life matters.*

*For everyone who's listening today, if you ever feel like Ethan did and you're thinking about taking your own life, stop, right now, and listen to me. You never know what tomorrow will bring. Look what happened with Ethan! He found the strength to keep on going and you can too. He not only made things better at his high school; he gave hope to each person who read about his story in the newspaper. If you're struggling like Ethan was at first, turn to an adult you trust, whether it's one of your parents, the parent of a friend, or someone at school, and ask for support and guidance.*

*When it comes to reporting bullying, keep in mind that every school is different. If you tell your counselor you're being bullied and the situation doesn't improve, don't just give up. Take it up the chain of command. Next, talk to the principal. If that doesn't work, go to the superintendent. If you're still not seeing results, ask your parents to take you to the next school board meeting and tell your story. Type it up beforehand, and have copies with you ready to hand out. Documentation is a persuasive tool. If that doesn't yield results, and you know you've done everything you can, that you've made a sincere effort to work with the school, reach out to the education writer at your local paper and engage the power of the press.*

*Above all, stay strong, keep your cool, and persevere.*

## CHAPTER TWO

# Taylor

My life was falling apart. It all started 'cause I couldn't stand watching my friends constantly pick on this poor girl in my class. Her name was Amy. She was super shy and couldn't look at anyone. She could have been really pretty if she wanted, but she never took care of herself by the way she looked. She was invisible. I said to my friends that we should invite her to one of our amazing Friday sleepovers, and give her a makeover. My BFF, Alexis, got pissed.

"What is *wrong* with you?" she said. "Amy's a total freak!"

"Why do you always have to be so mean?" I said. "Maybe if somebody at this school gave her a chance she'd be a whole different person."

I felt bad for Amy. Every day at lunch, she'd sit by herself. Sometimes, I'd catch her staring at our table. She wanted to sit with us. I said to my friends, "Come on you guys, let's at least invite her to sit with us."

They all laughed.

My friends and I were part of the popular clique. We were varsity cheerleaders. We got good grades and dated the hottest guys at school. My boyfriend was on the basketball team and debate. I always had tons of cool stuff to do with my friends. I just thought that was normal. I was stressed out about applying to colleges, but everyone in my group was too, so it was just one more thing we could bond over when we hung out.

Amy had gone to school with us since sixth grade. She was always made fun of a little but none of us paid much attention 'cause we were used to it, and besides, she never said anything. Some kids got picked on, and she was one of them. It's just how it was. But that year, things got really twisted. The other kids started messing with Amy's head. It's like they wanted to break her, to see her melt down. This jerk in my math class asked Amy for a date, and then, he stood her up. When she sent him a text the next day at school asking why he never even called, he said, "Holy sh\_t, baby, you didn't think I was *serious*! Why would anyone go out with a dog like you? Arf! Arf!" When he saw her in the hallway, he was with a bunch of his friends and they all started

barking at her. I wasn't there, but one of them told me about it. He was smiling, thought it was hilarious. I heard from the nurse Amy was so upset that she barfed and had to go home early.

It made me sick. Even my BFFs were getting into it. Everyone was on Facebook and Pinterest and Twitter. They'd trash-talk Amy and any other kids they looked down on too. My classmates were becoming meaner all the time. I felt like I was in some horror movie, and one by one, all my friends were being taken over by evil beings, sent here to destroy the earth, or at least our school. Finally, I had to pick a side.

After gym class I was in the locker room changing. Alexis started pushing Amy around, calling her names I don't even want to say here. Amy kept asking her to stop, but the more she begged, the harder Alexis tried to hurt her. Everyone knew Amy's mom was a little off. Amy had to live with her grandma for six months the year before, 'cause her mom had been in the hospital for "exhaustion," which we all knew was code for some sort of breakdown.

"Amy, the moment your mom got pregnant with you, she should have committed suicide," Alexis told her.

I was shocked. I couldn't believe what had just come out of my best friend's mouth. Amy just stood there, shaking. I ran over to her and hugged her. She told me her mom did try to kill herself, she swallowed a bottle of pills, and that's why she was in the hospital last year. I told myself Alexis couldn't have known that. By now, Amy was crying and I was trying to comfort her. Alexis was giving me one of her famous dirty looks. I was starting to figure out that my BFF was a royal bitch.

"Why do you even care about that worthless chick?" she said. "Since when do you give a sh\_t about anyone but you?"

Just then the bell rang, thank God. I walked Amy to the nurse's office and told her to chill there for a while.

"Thanks," she said. "I didn't mean to get you into trouble with your friend."

"That's okay," I said. "With friends like that, who needs enemies?" We both laughed.

Cheerleading practice was a nightmare. Alexis turned the whole squad against me. It sucked. All I did was help someone who needed a friend. Why do you only get to choose friends who your other friends are cool with, and if you want to be friends with someone they don't like, you're screwed? It's not fair. Every day, things got worse. My BFFs started tripping me during practice. For one of our routines we had to form a pyramid. As we were getting into position, someone whispered, "I hope you break

your neck, bitch.” There was so much hate in her voice, it was like *dripping* with it. I couldn’t take it. I ran out of the gym. The coach came after me and said she thought I should take some time off, that I was a “distraction to the others.” I guess Alexis got to her too . . .

My friends didn’t like me hanging with someone they didn’t think was cool and they were going to make me pay for it until I stopped. Alexis, and even my boyfriend, only seemed to care about me when I was doing what they wanted. I couldn’t be my own person, and when I finally did something for someone other than myself, when I acted unselfishly for once, everybody started hating on me.

For a week, I kept trying to figure out what to do next. I didn’t tell my mom about having to take time off from cheerleading. Instead, when I was supposed to be at practice, I went to the movies or hung out at the mall instead. My mom was clueless about the whole thing until one of the other cheerleader’s moms called to say how sorry she was about what happened. I knew when I got home and saw my mom’s face that I’d have to tell the truth. So I did. I told her how mean my friends were acting this year, how Alexis messed with Amy for no reason, and how I couldn’t handle it anymore, that even if it meant losing all my friends, better that than losing myself. I thought she’d freak because she’d always been so proud of her “popular daughter.” She was bullied in high school, and seeing me hanging out with the “in-crowd” took away some of that pain. It was like justice for her. Now, I wasn’t only unpopular; I was a target.

“I’m so glad you reached out to Amy,” Mom said. “I’ve never been prouder of you.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. My mom surprised me. I thought she’d be mad at me for blowing everything.

“I feel terrible you were afraid to confide in me, that you had to go through this alone,” she said. “Promise me that will never, ever happen again, that you’ll always talk to me, no matter what, okay?”

That night, when my dad got home from work, Mom and I told him the entire story. He listened to every word, and then, together, we came up with a plan. I couldn’t wait!

First, I made a list of all the kids at school who were being bullied; Amy wasn’t the only one. Then, I called Amy and asked her if she wanted to start an anti-bullying club with me. At first she wasn’t very into it, but I convinced her. We went to the principal together. It was a hard meeting because I had to tell him what happened with Alexis. He asked me if she’d been behaving like this for a while. I told him she could be

bitchy sometimes, but lately, it was way over the top. I thought he'd want to punish her, but he was worried about her. It made me feel bad that I hadn't been worried about her too. After all, we had been best friends since middle school. I decided that that would be one of the goals of our club, to not just give bullied students somewhere to turn for support, but to help the bullies, too.

The principal was psyched about the club idea, and he said he could even find some money for it. Amy and I began signing up members. Some kids were totally into being asked (the fact I had been popular was working for me in a way I never imagined). Others didn't want to be in a club for "freaks and losers," but when we explained what we had planned, like makeover parties, inviting their favorite authors to come and speak at the school, meeting with politicians about bullying, and other really cool things, they got more interested. It wasn't easy, but within a month, we were the talk of the school! Our first official meeting, the superintendent and the town mayor did a proclamation in our honor, launching the club.

Slowly, some of my old friends, who had sided with Alexis, told me they were sorry and that they'd like to get into the club. We worked with the school counselor on a Students Bill of Rights that said what to do if you're bullied and what to expect back from the school. It created "accountability," which my dad told me was a big deal.

I'll always be grateful to the principal for teaching me that having compassion for the bully, and trying to find out what's wrong, is more important than punishment. It finally came out that Alexis was in an awful situation at home. She never told me. She'd never told any of us, but her dad had tried to kill himself. No wonder she made that nasty crack to Amy. She was in her own hell and taking it out on everyone and everything.

If you're going through what I did and feel like your friends are all turning on you, even though it's scary, you have to be true to your own heart. Speak up for people who won't defend themselves or can't. I think it's more important to like yourself than to have others think you're cool. I know it may not seem like that now, but try it. Follow that little voice inside you that you know is telling you the right thing to do. See what happens. You'll be totally relieved that you did.



*Taylor, I'm so proud of your strength! Even more importantly, I'm proud of your compassion. If anyone here is going through what Taylor did, I know how scary it is, but you're braver than you think. Don't let the fear of losing your friends make you*

*less than who you are. Your real friends will support you. One thing Taylor learned from this experience is the real meaning of friendship. Friends are not people who only care about you when you live up to their concept of cool. Taylor couldn't be her own person if she allowed others to dictate to her who she should be. She—and you—can do things not just for yourselves but for others. Your real friends will support you. Even if they don't right away, they'll come around eventually. Those who turn on you completely were never friends to begin with, and deep down you know that.*

*If you know someone who's being meaner than usual, who's acting in ways she never did before, instead of becoming angry or wanting to get back at that person for hurting you, be curious. Try to find out as much as you can about what's happening in that person's life. Ask anyone who might be able to offer information. Chances are, like Alexis, you'll discover the bully is going through something he hasn't told you about, and he's bringing all that unresolved fear and anger to school. Curiosity leads to compassion. The more you know about the bully's story, the more you'll be able to help everyone involved.*

*Curiosity is also important when it comes to helping those who are being bullied. Think about all the kids at your school who get picked on or maybe just feel invisible. Make a list like Taylor did, and reach out to them. Ask around. Make sure you haven't overlooked anyone. I'm an activist. That means I take action to motivate action in others. Taylor became an activist the moment she defended Amy. You can be an activist too. Start an anti-bullying club at your school. You may feel alone, but you're not. You CAN make a difference.*

*Lastly, Taylor was afraid to tell her mom what was going on at first. And when she finally did tell the truth, her mom was totally supportive. She was afraid and didn't have to be. Unless you have a really bad relationship with your parents, trust them. Talk to them. Let them in. They may surprise you like Taylor's mom surprised her. If you and your parents aren't on good terms, before you decide not to tell them anything, talk it out with your school counselor or another adult you trust. Ask them if they would help you break the ice. Sometimes, all it takes is another adult to smooth things over.*



## CHAPTER THREE

# Cameron

Zero tolerance policies suck. This jerk in my math class, Tyler, who'd been on me since the beginning of the year, got so up in my face one afternoon I could smell the peanut butter on his breath from lunch. He pinned me against the locker and kept saying what a pussy I was. His friends laughed and told him to kick the sh\_t out of me.

I wasn't afraid to fight. I didn't want to get hurt and blow my chances of a dance scholarship. All I ever wanted was to be a dancer. I went straight from school to dance practice. I'd been taking dance lessons since I was little. My mom was raising me alone and we never had enough money. A scholarship was my only shot at my dream and I wasn't about to risk it on some stupid fight.

I was in eighth grade, but I worried about stuff way more than other kids my age. My mom said I was an "old soul." My dad left us when I was a baby. I barely remember him. It was just my mom, my sister, and me. Everybody at school thought I was weird, and they told me all the time that I'd never fit in. Gym class was rough. I hated dodge ball most. Some of the kids threw the ball at my face. They got in trouble a few times, but it only made things worse. My doctor, who was a friend of my mom's, said he'd write me a note to get me excused from PE, but my school had a rule that if you couldn't participate, you still had to change into your gym uniform and cheer on the other kids from the bleachers. Something about "team spirit." What a choice—they were friggin' going to make fun of me either way. I toughed it out.

Every day, I hated school more. I was sick of being looked down on. Tyler and his friends wouldn't give me a break. They made fun of how I dressed, my hair, my voice. Anything. I was into old clothes and wore lots of cool hats. I had this awesome black fedora, like the ones in black-and-white movies, and I'd wear it with an old tweed blazer and jeans. It was a cool look, and I liked looking cool. Mom let me make some of my own clothes. I did tons of stuff with bright colors, and made stuff with unusual patterns and designs. I made all my own dance costumes too. Part of it was because I loved doing it. Part of it was also about money. We lived in a town in New York where almost everyone at school came from serious money. My mom worked two jobs, and

while we didn't want for anything, we couldn't afford Abercrombie either. We were always on a budget. I know I could have tried to look more like everybody else, but it made me mad that I had to be less than who I was to be accepted. Besides, I did it in sixth grade and it was a disaster. My classmates knew I was trying to be someone I wasn't, and they made fun of me more. I decided it was better to be true to myself even if they didn't like it.

That day Tyler messed with me by the lockers, I knew he wanted to start a fight. He didn't care about getting into trouble. That would only make him look cooler to his friends. I thought I was going to throw up from his breath.

"Come on, dude, just friggin' get off me," I said.

"What a pussy!"

"Cut it out!" I said.

He and his friends kept laughing.

I tried to push him away.

Just then, a teacher came running over. We were both sent to the principal's office and suspended for three days for fighting. When I told my mom, she was furious at my principal.

"Why should *you* get suspended too?" she said. "You're the victim here!"

"I know, Mom, but that's how the school is," I told her. "It's zero tolerance."

"I understand that, but what else could you have done? Tyler had you pinned down. All you were trying to do was break free."

Mom wanted to stand up to them. She didn't have it easy where we lived either. Most of the other parents were snobs. Mom told me when she went to PTA meetings the other people looked at her like she didn't belong, but it never stopped her from being heard. My mom had a lot of balls. When this stuff with Tyler happened, she decided to change things herself. She asked authors and experts to come to the school and speak. She called lawyers. Some of them helped her for free. I was proud of her, but a part of me was freaking out too. The principal and some of the other parents were getting really pissed off, and I already had it hard enough at school.

After my suspension was over, I didn't have any friends. Tyler's dad grounded him over the suspension, and he blamed me. Tyler was popular, and if you stood up to him or anyone in that clique, you'd pay for it. Between that and my mom's stuff, no one wanted to hang out with me. I kept dancing and tried to ignore the bullies. That's what a lot of adults tell you to do. *It never works*. I learned the hard way that year. The more I ignored them—you should have seen the sick things they posted on YouTube. The

more I tried not to pay attention to them, the meaner they got. When they started tripping me in the halls, and going after my knees in dodge ball, I couldn't take it anymore . . .

My dance coach set me straight. She said I needed to get my confidence back. She told me that I never hung out with the kids from dance class, that I had become too much of a loner. The other kids thought I was stuck-up. That really bothered me. I wasn't stuck-up. I was afraid if they really got to know me outside of dance practice, they wouldn't like me. My confidence sucked. So I did what she said. I started talking to other kids in dance. We began hanging out a lot. There were way more girls than guys, and I'd never thought about it before, but that was pretty cool. My coach was right. Within weeks, I felt way better about myself. And you want to know the best part? The more I got into my new friends, the less I cared whether people at school liked me. When I stopped caring, the people at school did start to come around. It was so weird. Like at lunch, some of my old friends who had been totally ignoring me since the Tyler thing started talking to me again. They even asked me to sit with them at lunch. I still got bullied in gym class, but then my dance coach gave me this great idea. Part of gym class was square-dancing, but everyone hated it. It was totally lame and no one did it anymore in real life. So I asked my gym teacher if we could do hip-hop instead. At first he wasn't sure, but when I told some of the other kids in my class about the idea, they were so into it that we convinced our teacher. Since he didn't know hip-hop himself, I volunteered to teach everyone the basic moves. I even said we should do a hip-hop contest, where kids could make up their own steps and get extra credit. Gym went from being the worst part of my school day to the best. Some of the other kids still give me a hard time, but at least now, I don't feel so alone every day. People stick up for me, when before that would never happen.

I also started being nicer to my mom. I had been a real jerk to her since she started taking on the administration. She was doing it for me and I should be trying to help. I asked her what was going on, and she told me she was making progress. The superintendent was doing a special teacher meeting on bullying and invited Mom. She was shocked when I told her I wanted to be there too to support her. The day of the meeting, the superintendent thanked my mom for all she was doing for the district and then he asked her to give a speech. I was so proud. Who knew my mom could be such a good speaker! She was totally chill and super persuasive. She had tons of statistics about bullying, and why zero tolerance can be unfair. I saw a lot of teachers nodding

their heads and taking notes. When she was finished, everyone clapped. Even the principal was smiling.



*Cameron, I am so proud of both you and your mom, I could burst into applause myself! It took a lot of character to do what you guys did. Not only were you able to impact the adults in the school, but you had an effect on students, too. And I know the guts it took to put yourself out there with your dance mates. Your classmates had already burned you, and the possibility of rejection and ridicule again must have been terrifying. But you faced your fears, and look at the results!*

*One very important lesson to learn from Cameron's experience: If you're being bullied, I don't care what your parents or counselor has told you. DO NOT ignore the bullies. I repeat, DO NOT ignore them! I'll never understand why adults say that to bullied kids. First they tell you, "Don't be a bystander; if someone is getting bullied, defend that person," but then they'll turn around and say to you in the same breath, "Oh, you're being bullied? Just ignore it and walk away." Isn't that a mixed message? Aren't all those adults asking you to be a bystander in your own life? What they're suggesting is harmful. Then those same adults wonder why kids constantly tell them they don't understand. They don't. When you ignore the bullies, all you do is give them permission to keep on messing with you. Stand up for yourself. No one has the right to hurt you.*

*For those of you who are dealing with a similar situation to the one in which Cameron found himself, I understand how scary the thought of making new friends can be. Sometimes you have to go beyond your comfort zone and take a risk. The rewards can be great, and not doing anything, staying locked inside your own head, frustrated that nothing is changing in your life, but too scared to do what's necessary to change it, doesn't work either. If you're not involved in any activities outside of school, start doing some research. Ask your parents or counselor to help you. Google the park district, local public library, and community center the next town over from where you live and see what they offer for kids. It's important to get far enough away from your school that you'll meet all new people. Most of these organizations feature everything from dance, martial arts, and soccer, to theater and crafts. You can also search activities and clubs for teens. There are private dance studios, music and drama clubs, the list goes on and on. Find something you think might be cool and enroll. It'll give you something to look forward to and a whole new group of friends.*