

## **Assaults Hurt; Community Betrayal Devastates**

**By Kayla Taylor**

The press recently reported the suicide of Jack Reid when Lawrenceville School acknowledged it could have done more to support him after he was bullied by peers. Not long before, a graphic video documented the bullying of Adriana Kuch, who ended her life while her school apparently neglected to protect her. Every day, reports of bullying permeate institutions around the country. Yet, somehow, each incident is unable to ignite a national conversation about our systemic failure to prevent bullying and respond humanely to reports of assault.

I should know. My family experienced the failure firsthand.

My elementary-aged child was bullied over the course of several years while almost everyone in a position to help looked the other way. One particularly difficult day, classmates homed in on her fear of ticks by picking and prodding at her until she was convinced they were killing her. Witness descriptions suggest our child experienced a full-blown anxiety attack in front of her class. And throughout the ordeal, her tormentors laughed.

The public humiliation caused our child to question her own right to dignity. She even questioned her will to live, just as Jack Reid and Adriana Kuch did. I will never forget the fear on her face or throughout my body as she told me what she was considering. She was eight.

Many months before this episode, when I first realized my child was being mistreated, I assumed our problem could be solved swiftly. I believed adults would support the targeted student, teach the aggressors to be kinder, and coach peers to stand up to future playground injustice.

Unfortunately, while the teacher expressed remorse, the head of school refused to acknowledge any bullying at all. He also declined to implement transparent guidelines for

preventing and responding to peer aggression. He even restricted the teacher from speaking about the matter with me directly. He appeared more preoccupied with preserving the school's reputation than with student well-being.

Several friends expressed concern, but most peers in our school community looked away. They know bullying happens elsewhere but were unable to acknowledge it could happen here. Instead, many suggested my child should be less "sensitive" and "toughen up" to "deal in the real world." They seemed to imply that a kid who is bullied perhaps deserves it, especially if she doesn't fit the mold, as my child doesn't. The onus is on the target to figure out how to "fit in."

We finally enlisted the school board for help, noting our child wasn't the only one suffering. Trustees hired an "independent" investigator, but our potential savior turned out to be a lawyer, apparently hired to design a new narrative, protect the school's image, and limit liability. After the "investigation," the board sent us a crushing letter that felt like a victim-shaming and proclaimed no evidence of bullying (even though a student had been suspended for bullying our child and adult witnesses confirmed several accounts). A senior staff member also declared that our child needed to stay clear of one of the students who had taunted her for months (and whose father was a trustee). Apparently, the trustee's kid was the one in need of protection.

The experience was mind-bending until I came across the research of [Jennifer Freyd, Ph.D.](#) She coined the term "[DARVO](#)" to explain how people commonly react to reports of abuse and assault: *Deny* the accounts; *attack* the character of the aggrieved; and *reverse* the *victim* and the *offender* so the initial wrongdoer appears to be the one who is being taken down unfairly.

My family experienced each element. Over the past few years, I've noticed victims of bullying aren't the only ones treated this way. While each assault is unique and each community deserves its own platform, DARVO is a common tactic used to repress a wide variety of people. Children molested by Boy Scout leaders and Catholic priests have endured DARVO. So have

gymnasts and soccer players. American soldiers were DARVO'd, even as they defended our country. And minorities of all kinds experience DARVO regularly when they report discrimination. Not even the rich and powerful are immune. Just look at the cases of Harvey Weinstein or, more recently, Jeff Shell. In each incidence, the target was abused by an assailant and then RE-traumatized by the overarching institution that failed to help, all while the majority of bystanders looked the other way. Effectively, the entire community condoned the assaults.

This kind of betrayal can trigger feelings of severe isolation and despair. And it can cause people to doubt basic goodness and even humanity itself. I believe this is what happened to Jack Reid and Adriana Kuch.

And it happened to my family. While several peers initially wronged my child, I soon came to realize that the most damaging blows came from the complicity of the adults, and especially the institutional leaders, who failed to support her. The collective apathy sent the devastating message that she was unworthy of dignity or belonging. Elie Wiesel understood: “The opposite of love is not hate, it’s indifference.”

We eventually pulled our children out of the school that betrayed us, but not all families have this option. So, I’ve spent a lot of time over the past few years wondering how we as a society can do better...how we can respond more humanely to people in their times of greatest need. Lawrenceville provided a rare glimpse of accountability when it acknowledged wrongdoing, but more needs to be done. (To those at Lawrenceville who disagree with the school’s admission, I recommend Lacy Crawford’s *Notes on a Silencing*, which details the tragic consequences of St. Paul School’s apparent avoidance of responsibility.)

I think the first imperative is to understand that injustice isn’t something that happens over there. It occurs in all communities. But to feel safe, our brains often reconstruct our perceptions of others’ experiences so that we can feel better and less vulnerable ourselves.

Fortunately, we aren't fully at the mercy of our subconscious. If we understand the power of our neural wiring—that our instincts can cause us to forsake people in serious need—then we can endeavor to think deliberately before dismissing others. Said another way, we can work to be compassionate rather than complicit.

I think we could also benefit from basic protocols for supporting people who have been victimized. I looked far and wide for guidelines for responding to gross mistreatment—I hoped to find something produced by influential school systems, lawmakers, police, or even the military—but I came up shorthanded. So, after consulting with Dr. Freyd, exploring the academic research, reading accounts written by survivors, and talking to dear friends who've been betrayed, I've concocted my own vision, borne of both lived experience and research, for what might be possible. It looks like something this:

When people report assaults, they are thanked for their bravery, not condemned as snitches. Each incident is taken seriously, and survivors are treated as credible witnesses to their own experiences. They are also offered knowledgeable, trained advocates who can protect against DARVO and any form of victim-shaming. And peers support their friends in need rather than turn their backs on them.

Independent, authentic investigators are appointed to pursue truth rather than orchestrate a cover-up, as is de rigueur. (Even news agencies, whose primary missions are to expose and report facts, have failed on this count.) Power differentials are identified and dismantled; no human is considered more worthy than another. The accused are believed to be innocent until proven guilty\*, but their reputations and welfare are not valued more than the accuser's. All efforts prioritize integrity and morality over reputation and legal agendas. Anyone with a conflict

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\*Currently, survivors are reflexively disbelieved. We must correct this regular injustice and create new norms, but we also must not swing to the opposite extreme. For example, the accused should not be immediately condemned without reasonable confirmation of assault.

of interest is recused, and non-disclosure agreements—especially those that obfuscate facts and favor those in power—are disallowed. Also, leaders don't let processes drag and exacerbate anxiety.

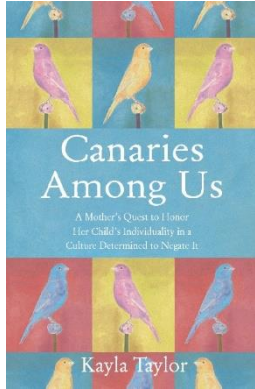
If wrongdoing is confirmed, the institution doesn't rush to a public relations offensive. Rather than grandstand about the way it handled the situation, it humbly takes a visible stand against inhumane conduct. It also doesn't try to paper things over to make nice with everyone. Leaders apologize publicly and sincerely, and they encourage transgressors to be accountable as well. Abuses of power and failures to uphold the institution's mission, including in the C-suite and on the board, are addressed.

Nobody assumes they know what survivors need more than the survivors do themselves. Instead, the judgment and autonomy of people who have been mistreated are valued, and space is made for them to outline what they need to feel safe and a sense of belonging going forward—without loss of reputation, rights, or status. Leaders and offenders then respect those needs and attempt to repair harm done.

Throughout, survivors' privacy is protected, and no personal information is released without their consent. Survivors are also offered safe and validating spaces to share their truths while others bear witness. (For a beautiful example, look to the judge in the Larry Nassar case who set aside sufficient time for over 150 girls and women to speak their piece.)

Ideally, wrongdoers are reintegrated into the community according to the tenets of restorative justice. But if the crime is too great or the wrongdoer refuses to be contrite, leaders ensure the health and safety of the rest of the community. And unlike common practice today, the transgressor is made to leave, not the victim.

Kayla Taylor\* is a best-selling writer, advocate, and parent. She detailed her family's experience with bullying in *Canaries Among Us*. More information can be found at [www.KaylaTaylorWrites.com](http://www.KaylaTaylorWrites.com).



\*Identities have been altered to protect children's privacy, an important element of victim-centered approaches.