

Sladjana Vidovic

Four Bullied Teens Dead by Their Own Hands at Ohio School

MENTOR, Ohio (CBS/AP) Sladjana Vidovic's body lay in an open casket, dressed in the sparkly pink dress she had planned to wear to the prom. Days earlier, she had tied one end of a rope around her neck and the other around a bed post before jumping out her bedroom window.

The 16-year-old's last words, scribbled in English and her native Croatian, told of her daily torment at Mentor High School, where students mocked her accent, taunted her with insults like "Slutty Jana" and threw food at her.

It was the fourth time in little more than two years that a bullied high school student in this small Cleveland suburb on Lake Erie died by his or her own hand - three suicides, one overdose of antidepressants. One was bullied for being gay, another for having a learning disability, another for being a boy who happened to like wearing pink.

Now two families - including the Vidovics - are suing the school district, claiming their children were bullied to death and the school did nothing to stop it. The lawsuits come after a national spate of high-profile suicides by gay teens and others, and during a time of national soul-searching about what can be done to stop it.

If there has been soul-searching among the bullies in Mentor - a pleasant beachfront community that was voted one of the "100 Best Places to Live" by CNN and Money magazine this year - Sladjana's family saw too little of it at her wake in October 2008.

Suzana Vidovic found her sister's body hanging over the front lawn. The family watched, she said, as the girls who had tormented Sladjana for months walked up to the casket - and laughed.

"They were laughing at the way she looked," Suzana says, crying. "Even though she died."

Sladjana Vidovic, whose family had moved to northeast Ohio from Bosnia when she was a little girl, was pretty, vivacious and charming. She loved to dance. She would turn on the stereo and drag her father out of his chair, dance him in circles around the living room.

"Nonstop smile. Nonstop music," says her father, Dragan, who speaks only a little English.

At school, life was very different. She was ridiculed for her thick accent. Classmates tossed insults like "Slutty Jana" or "Slut-Jana-Vagina." A boy pushed her down the stairs. A girl smacked her in the face with a water bottle.

Phone callers in the dead of night would tell her to go back to Croatia, that she'd be dead in the morning, that they'd find her after school, says Suzana Vidovic.

"Sladjana did stand up for herself, but toward the end she just kind of stopped," says her best friend, Jelena Jandric. "Because she couldn't handle it. She didn't have enough strength."

Vidovic's parents say they begged the school to intervene many times. They say the school promised to take care of her.

She had already withdrawn from Mentor and enrolled in an online school about a week before she killed herself.

When the family tried to retrieve records about their reports of bullying, school officials told them the records were destroyed during a switch to computers. The family sued in August.

Two years after her death, Dragan Vidovic waves his hand over the family living room, where a vase of pink flowers stands next to a photograph of Sladjana.

"Today, no music," he says sadly. "No smile."

Eric Mohat was flamboyant and loud and preferred to wear pink most of the time. When he didn't get the lead soprano part in the choir his freshman year, he was indignant, his mother says.

He wore a stuffed animal strapped to his arm, a lemur named Georges that was given its own seat in class.

"It was a gag," says Mohat's father, Bill. "And all the girls would come up to pet his monkey. And in his Spanish class they would write stories about Georges."

Mohat's family and friends say he wasn't gay, but people thought he was.

"They called him fag, homo, queer," says his mother, Jan. "He told us that."

Bullies once knocked a pile of books out of his hands on the stairs, saying, "Pick up your books, faggot," says Dan Hughes, a friend of Eric's.

Kids would flick him in the head or call him names, says 20-year-old Drew Juratovac, a former student. One time, a boy called Mohat a "homo," and Juratovac told him to leave Mohat alone.

"I got up and said, 'Listen, you better leave this kid alone. Just walk away,'" he says. "And I just hit him in the face. And I got suspended for it."

Eric Mohat shot himself on March 29, 2007, two weeks before a choir trip to Hawaii.

His parents asked the coroner to call it "bullicide." At Eric's funeral and after his death, other kids told the Mohats that they had seen the teen relentlessly bullied in math class. The Mohats demanded that police investigate, but no criminal activity was found.

Two years later, in April 2009, the Mohats sued the school district, the principal, the superintendent and Eric's math teacher. The federal lawsuit is on hold while the Ohio Supreme Court considers a question of state law regarding the case.

"Did we raise him to be too polite?" Bill Mohat wonders. "Did we leave him defenseless in this school?"

Meredith Rezak, 16, shot herself in the head three weeks after the death of Mohat, a good friend of hers. Her cell phone, found next to her body, contained a photograph of Mohat with the caption "R.I.P. Eric a.k.a. Twiggy."

Rezak was bright, outgoing and a well-liked player on the volleyball team. Shortly before her suicide, she had joined the school's Gay-Straight Alliance and told friends and family she thought she might be gay.

Juratovac says Rezak endured her own share of bullying -- "name-calling, just stupid trivial stuff" -- but nobody ever knew it was getting to her.

"Meredith ended up coming out that she was a lesbian," he says. "I think much of that sparked a lot of the bullying from a lot of the other girls in school, 'cause she didn't fit in."

Her best friend, Kevin Simon, doesn't believe that bullying played a role in Rezak's death. She had serious issues at home that were unrelated to school, he says.

After Mohat's death, people saw Rezak crying at school, and friends heard her talk of suicide herself.

A year after Rezak's death, the older of her two brothers, 22-year-old Justin, also shot and killed himself. His death certificate mentioned "chronic depressive reaction."

This March, her only other sibling, Matthew, died of a drug overdose at age 21.

Their mother, Nancy Merritt, lives in Colorado now. She doesn't think Meredith was bullied to death but doesn't really know what happened. On the phone, her voice drifts off, sounding disconnected, confused.

"So all three of mine are gone," she says. "I have to keep breathing."

Most mornings before school, Jennifer Eyring would take Pepto-Bismol to calm her stomach and plead with her mother to let her stay home.

"She used to sob to me in the morning that she did not want to go," says her mother, Janet. "And this is going to bring tears to my eyes. Because I made her go to school."

Eyring, 16, was an accomplished equestrian who had a learning disability. She was developmentally delayed and had a hearing problem, so she received tutoring during the school day. For that, her mother says, she was bullied constantly.

By the end of her sophomore year in 2006, Eyring's mother had decided to pull her out of Mentor High School and enroll her in an online school the following autumn. But one night that summer, Jennifer walked into her parents' bedroom and told them she had taken some of her mother's antidepressant pills to make herself feel better. Hours later, she died of an overdose.

The Eyrings do not hold Mentor High accountable, but they believe she would be alive today had she not been bullied. Her parents are speaking out in hopes of preventing more tragedies.

"It's too late for my daughter," Janet Eyring says, "but it may not be too late for someone else."

No official from Mentor public schools would comment for this story. The school also refused to provide details on its anti-bullying program.

Some students say the problem is the culture of conformity in this city of about 50,000 people: If you're not an athlete or cheerleader, you're not cool. And if you're not cool, you're a prime target for the bullies.

But that's not so different from most high schools. Senior Matt Super, who's 17, says the suicides unfairly paint his school in a bad light.

"Not everybody's a good person," he says. "And in a group of 3,000 people, there are going to be bad people."

StopCyberbullying.org founder Parry Aftab says this is the first time she's heard of two sets of parents suing a school at the same time for two independent cases of bullying or cyberbullying. No one has been accused of bullying more than one of the teens who died.

Barbara Coloroso, a national anti-bullying expert, says the school is allowing a "culture of mean" to thrive, and school officials should be held responsible for the suicides -- along with the bullies.

"Bullying doesn't start as criminal. They need to be held accountable the very first time they call somebody a gross term," Coloroso says. "That is the beginning of dehumanization."

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