

My name is Martha Ann Herrera and I want to share with you my son and my desire to increase mental health awareness in our public school system. Bryce Christian Herrera who was born on Christmas Day in 1991. I wished you could have known him.

How did I get here? On 9/26/06 I learned a valuable lesson.....what you don't know can hurt you and kill many. I am standing here as a mother of five boys and over a year ago I was standing in a crowd speaking at my son's funeral. What I said that day to over 400 kids is what I knew I had to say...a word of hope to other silent hurting children.

It was my message the day I buried my son and it is my message today. My family is a typical, normal family - no alcohol, physical, or drug abuse. We are a Christian family and my kids went to a Christian school for their elementary years. My children, like lots of kids today, did not live with both biological parents the past 5 years. If this contributed to Bryce's hopelessness I will always wonder.

My son had everything going for him - he was popular, athletic, handsome and had a bright future but clearly he was depressed - he was silently depressed. We were in counseling because I knew something was not right but my son choose to not utilize that tool because there is a stigma that it is not cool or ok to talk to a counselor. Bryce only allowed people to see what he wanted people to know about him. What if he would have felt comfortable telling a friend or anyone how he really felt?

If we could emphasize to kids the importance of seeking help and educating them on emotional and mental issues perhaps we could change the popular opinion and some lives could be saved. I believe that kids in school are more recognized when they are in trouble acting out but most of those kids are not the kids that attempt to hurt themselves. Depression is the silent killer and yet kids are educated about drugs, safe sex and guns but do they know about anxiety, depression, cutting, panic attacks and what to do with those thoughts and feelings. Not only do we need to educate the faculty but also kids and parents need to be educated so they can see the signs in their children and friends.

In my home I could see Bryce was sad and we had some anger

episodes but they were few and far between. I had my oldest son acting out in ways that had my main focus of concern which is why we started family counseling. If I had had any clue Bryce was in this place I would have had him in a hospital. Bryce had a sadness, a boredom, and a lack of desire to see the future.... I see that now looking back.

I have become more educated because of this tragedy in my own life. There is a stigma with the word suicide - it's the silent taboo. It's a stigma I desire to change. Our kids are dying daily and because no one wants to talk about it nothing is changing. Do you realize 12 kids everyday, which is one person every 2 hrs and 11 minutes, under the age of 25 completes a suicide. These are family members, children, friends, and students.

If we can begin to educate kids starting in the 7th grade - 12th grade on depression, anxiety, cutting, suicide as we do drugs and sex and they hear the same message year after year perhaps they might realize these are real issues with real solutions. It has been my experience from a Parents of Suicide group that unless there is a diagnosed mental health issue kids think it is "emo" or stupid to seek help.

Bryce is the second of my five boys. We live in a nice neighborhood. Bryce had all the perks a kid his age would want but still he was hopeless; so hopeless that he put a belt on his closet door and stepped off his bed and hanged himself knowing I would return in a few minutes. Did Bryce hope that I would find him alive? Did he know that within 9 seconds he would pass out and his small, muscular body would begin to die within 3 minutes. Did he know the permanence of such an act? Did he know that his friends would be terribly shaken by this impulsive, rash decision? Did he know that me as his mother would forever have a void in my life missing him wondering what he would look like?

Can you just close your eyes for a moment and think about the reality of losing one of your own children. Never seeing them go to their prom, graduating, getting married, having a child of their own. Most importantly knowing it did not have to be that way. My son was depressed. He muted it so well but he was depressed. Bryce's "cool" ness was a cover for his sadness. Did his friends know he was

depressed? Did he know what depression was? As educators you have an opportunity to save lives. I am asking and hoping that your desire will be to increase education on the signs and symptoms of depression not only to staff members but to parents and other fellow students in addition to making sure the kids are aware of places they can obtain help.

What I saw as a mother in hindsight is different than how I reasoned at the time. Here was a kid who walked a friend through a near death experience and he felt terrible guilt over it 6 months prior to his own death. I saw an incredible athlete lose his interest and joy in some sports. I was surprised when Bryce entered high school he was not going to try out for the football team. I spoke to him about this and he assured me that he felt he was too small for the team but he would do tennis and partner with his brother.

I saw Bryce get angry, very angry, over small things like me buying him a new binder for better organizational skills. I witnessed him putting a hole in my wall and then immediately being so upset at what he had done. At the time when these things occurred they were sporadic and I thought this is typical teenage stuff. His grades exiting 8th grade were good but at progress report time in 9th grade they were slipping but nothing terrible. It is not like he went from straight A's to F's....just a gradual decline but a difference from 8th grade.

The day that Bryce did this one of his teachers had emailed me and said Bryce seemed far off like he was in another place. Bryce and Drake had a tennis tournament that afternoon and I told Bryce that we would talk about his grades later that evening. In the midst of the craziness God allowed me to take Bryce to Starbucks alone to talk to him about what might be going on and how I could help. He was quiet but listened and I then took him home. I so often go back to that conversation and wonder did I listen to him or was I just talking. We have to listen to what kids are saying.

What I am trying to say is at the time I had no idea that Bryce was severely depressed. It was only after Bryce's funeral that I made myself take a close, hard look at all the facts. I now see things so clearly and differently. I now know after finding a broken belt in Bryce's closet that there is a possibility this was not the first time he had attempted this. I also found the piece of paper that had my son's

computer passwords on them and one of the passwords Bryce used was "help me". Do you know how that shook me up? When I saw that I remembered asking Bryce about it and he said, "oh mom I am just horsing around". His password for his email was "help me". Do you know how that makes me feel to see those words written down and I did nothing?

Bryce died in September and the following December I received a letter from him that he had written at camp just a few month before he died. His counselor told the boys to write a letter to themselves about where they were in life and where they were with God. He said that he would mail it to them around Christmas time. Bryce's counselor went on a mission trip so he gave the stack of letters to his mom and asked her to mail them. Can you imagine getting a letter from your son addressed to him in his own handwriting three months after he died? Let me read this letter to you:

"Hey, things are going pretty well now cuz I am at Pine Cove rite now and I hope they stay that way but I know that since I'm probably at school now things suck really bad now. Im probably doing bad at Spanish and IPC right now and am pissed off at something like parent stuff but ya its going good now but I know its gonna suck in a few months with school and all so I hope when I get this that I will remember how care free I am right now and how stressed I will be when I get this. Ya so I want to just see how different things are from now till when I get this its gonna be allot different cuz things are gonna suck bad. I just already see it coming watch and see."

Bryce projected his demise. When he was in 8th grade he was doing fine in Spanish and in Science but yet in the summer before school even started he not only said he would be doing poorly his exact words were - "I want to see how different things will be from now till when I get this. It's gonna be a lot different cuz things are gonna suck bad. I just already see it coming just watch and see." Clearly Bryce was aware of a feeling of sadness and hopelessness but he had no idea what to do with it although I provided a counselor he simply thought it was gay and refused to participate.

The Thursday before Bryce did this I went in his room that morning and told him how much I loved him and that I knew he was sad and

was not talking to me. I told him that was ok but I had to know that in 30 years I provided him all the tools and that his papa would be taking him to counseling that afternoon after school. I can see his beautiful blue eyes as if he were right here and now. He looked up at me, walked towards me, hugged me and said ok.

How do we educate kids on these feelings of hopelessness so that we can begin to save lives? Bryce's suicide has absolutely devastated my family and me. My extended family relationships are estranged and challenging to say the least. When something like this happens everyone is so busy pointing fingers and trying to find out whose fault this is that one can only imagine how much pain can be caused by words said. I have had to shield myself from the ones who are suppose to love me the most because they too in reality are trying to deal with the pain and grief that this has caused.

Only until I went to a Parents of Suicide retreat did I realize how common this was. Again it's the taboo of the word suicide and all that it implies. My children have lost a brother. This is so traumatic and it shocks me at times to find the details of that evening journaled in one of my kid's rooms. Details that I don't even recall but that are accurate.

One thing I struggle with even today in my home is hearing from kids, even my kids, who say someone is "emo" or crazy. It takes me back a bit and I tell them be careful what you are saying you have absolutely no idea where they are and how those words will hurt them. They in their own mind even though this occurred in our home and their brother was sick enough to take his own life do not have the knowledge or understanding of what killed Bryce. The very thing that killed Bryce could be ailing another child that is being labeled and ridiculed as "emo" or crazy.

I am fortunate, so fortunate to not have lost friends over this. God has surrounded me with an army of wonderful friends some I have had for years, some that had resurfaced and some that are new. I look back and it's ironic how God works. Prior to Bryce's death many years I met a wonderful but sad lady whose son had shot himself as a teenager. She kept that terrible secret to herself for over 20 years. She in confidence shared that secret with me many years ago. Before I knew I would walk this path God had already started preparing me

by sharing with her that she was allowing Satan to rob her of the glory of her other daughter because of what her son did. But because suicide and the word itself implies fault, failure, illness, and many other disgusting words that secret made her have a dark, sad, life. When I walked in and saw my son hanging on his closet door...God brought her to mind. Of all times I had not thought or talked to this woman in several years.

I knew that if I kept silent and did not speak out on suicide and depression Bryce's life would have been for nothing. I am not proud of what Bryce did but I am not embarrassed of him either. I love my son so much but he made a poor choice. He was not educated on the topic and failed. What can we do to help educate others so there won't be anymore Bryce's? I wake up each morning and for a few seconds I think oh it's a new day and then I think oh my goodness this is my life and I am missing a son, a death that could have been prevented.

Bryce had a My Space as most kids do today and it is amazing to me how active his My Space has been since his death. The messages the kids leave are concerning and disturbing to say the least. Clearly there is still an outpouring of hurt, confusion, and pain. These kids are pouring out their hearts on My Space instead of talking to someone who can offer them tools to deal with this tragedy that has affected their lives. I am grateful and I know the district wants to provide grief counseling after a tragedy, however in reality, the kids are not utilizing this tool because once again in their mind they think it's stupid and it won't help.

We need to educate kids young enough to realize there are tools that are available and how to obtain them. Counselors need to be educated on the methods of trying to reach the kids in a way they will hear. The kids need a safe place to talk even if it's a teacher who does not have their psychology degree. Kids see going to a counselor as them being sick or crazy. This is a stigma that needs to be changed.

Depression is a real medical condition that causes an imbalance of brain chemicals and alters our perception of reality. It is a human condition. It causes one to feel hopeless. Counseling helps to give tools to handle life's stresses that often lead to depression and

medication is vital for the more serious forms of depression. Our youth (as well as adults) need to be educated on the validity and dynamics of the illness to remove the stigma of shame that surround it and allow people to reach out for help. Depression does not mean that you have a character defect or that you are weak.

Depression occurs much more than people realize and it masks itself very well, so we need to be better educated to recognize it. Knowledge is power. I feel that as a district we should implement a program for a mental health awareness week each year and we could be a model district for the state. I think that a week of awareness once a year from 7th grade - 12th grade is desperately needed. The issues that we can address to kids could be depression, suicide, anxiety, eating disorders, cutting, divorce etc. - we will find that we will meet many kids who need to hear more information in detail about these issues. Our kids are dying and hurting and we can't just sweep it under the rug.

Suicide is a top killer in our youth and if we start talking to these kids in middle school and do it every year who knows how many kids we might save. Depression is no different than untreated alcohol or drug use. It has deadly results. I want to thank you for the opportunity of sharing my son and our story with you. You see as a mother I would much rather cry because someone cared to ask about Bryce and acknowledge his life and memory than to cry because no one wants to talk about it and just pretend he did not exist. Bryce was here and if his death goes without speaking than he would have died in vane. By speaking the truth, as painful and ugly as it is, and one life could be saved and no other parent, brother, friend, teacher has to endure what we have had to endure then it is worth me speaking out.