Case Study – Two Lives Too Many – Peggy Kern

Thirteen-year-old Megan Meier couldn’t believe her good luck.

 “Mom! Mom! Mom! Look at him!” Megan exclaimed. Her eyes sparkled with excitement. “He’s *hot*!”

 “Do you know who he is?” Megan’s mother asked.

 His name was Josh Evans. He was 16 years old. And he had sent Megan a friend request on MySpace.

 “Please, can I add him?” Megan begged. “Please!”

 Megan’s mother agreed. She’d kept a close eye on Megan’s MySpace activity, and she and Megan’s father knew their daughter’s password. Megan could not log on without their permission.

 Megan’s mother was glad to see her daughter so excited. Megan hadn’t always had an easy life. She was a heavy girl and had struggled to lose weight for years. She also had battled depression. But things were getting better. Megan had just started eighth grade at a new middle school. She’d lost 20 pounds and joined the volleyball team. She’d also ended a stormy friendship with a girl who lived up the block.

 For the next six weeks, under her mother’s watchful eye, Megan and Josh got to know each other. Josh said he was homeschooled. His parents were divorced and he’d just moved to town wit his mom and two brothers. The family struggled for money.

 “When I was 7 my dad left me and my mom and my older brother and my newborn brother 3 boys gosh I know poor mom yeah she had such a hard time when we were younger finding work to pay for us after he left,” Josh wrote in an email.

 Megan seemed happy – and much of her happiness came from talking with her new friend, a cute boy who seemed to understand her. Each day after school she’d rush home to check her computer to see if Josh had written her.

 Megan’s mother kept tabs on their conversations. She noticed Josh was always polite, but he never wanted to speak to Megan on the phone. He also made excuses when Megan asked for his phone number. Still, he was never rude, and Megan seemed thrilled about their blossoming friendship.

 Then suddenly, on a Sunday in October, Josh sent Megan a disturbing message.

 “I don’t’ know if I want to be friends with you anymore because I’ve heard that you are not very nice to your friends,” he wrote.

 Confused, Megan fired off a quick reply. “What are you talking about?” she wrote. But Josh did not respond.

 Then on Monday, Megan came home from school to find that Josh ha sent her more troubling messages. But that wasn’t the worst of it. To her horror, he had also shared some of Megan’s private online messages with other people online.

 Who was this boy? Why was he doing this to her?

 Megan’s mother was in a rush to take her other daughter to the doctor. She ordered Megan to log off of MySpace until she returned. But a few minutes later, she received a frantic call from Megan. She was being verbally attacked, not just by Josh but also by a large group of people. Suddenly Megan had become the target of an angry gang of invisible faces that seemed intent on burning her to the ground. She was called a “slut” and “fat.” Surveys were posted asking cruel, embarrassing questions about her. And Josh continued to send her nasty messages.

 Megan’s mother pleaded with Megan to turn off the computer.

 “No, mom. They are all being so mean to me!” Megan wept. When her mother and sister returned from the doctor appointment, Megan fled to her room in tears.

 What had Megan felt that night, alone in her dark room? How did she make sense of what had happened? Josh turning on her; her private messages made public; an unending stream of online insults; the betrayal of a boy she’d liked and trusted.

 Megan must have been in agony, She’d been attacked not just by strangers, but by someone she trusted and cared about. She’d been so nice to Josh. Up until that Sunday, things had seemed perfect. He thought she was cool, and she dared to believe him. And perhaps, tragically, she also believed his final message to her, a message her parents would not find until it was too late. It read, in part:

 “You are a bad person and everybody hates you… The world would be a better place without you.”

 Megan took her life that night, hanging herself in her closed bedroom. She died believing Josh Evans was a real boy.

 In truth, he never existed.

 A group of girls from Megan’s neighborhood had created a fake profile to trick Megan. The goal was to gain Megan’s trust-to make her believe that “Josh” liked her-and then use that information to humiliate her online.

 The girls eventually shared the password to the “Josh Evans” profile with other kids, encouraging them to participate in the joke. Slowly, over the course of six weeks, they gained Megan’s trust. On the night she killed herself, they all took turns attacking Megan. They thought it was hilarious.

 While their intention was not to drive Megan to suicide, that is how their cruel joke ended. Maybe Megan was more vulnerable than other kids. She did struggle with low self-esteem. She was heavy and sometimes, very, very, sad. Perhaps that made her an easy target, and it could have made her more fragile than others facing the same kind of cruelty.

 But if the attacks and lies had never happened, Megan would not have endured the despair that overwhelmed her during her final hours. If the attacks had never happened, she might still be with us today.

 Tragically, Megan’s story is not unique. John Halligan knows this. His son Ryan committed suicide after enduring months of cyberbullying attacks from his classmates.

 John ransacked his son’s room the day after Ryan’s death searching for answers. He emptied drawers, rifled through notebooks, and tore apart the closet. He searched every pocket and opened every box. He was desperate to find something – a note, a diary, *anything* – that would explain why his 13-year-old son was dead.

 Then he spotted Ryan’s computer.

 “I logged onto Ryan’s AOL account and instantly received dozens of responses. First, they wanted to know why I was using Ryan’s account,” John remembers. “Well, I wanted to know if anyone was willing to share information with me-then the mystery began to unravel.”

 Ryan was a sweet and gentle kid, a lanky boy with brown hair who liked to swim, bike, camp, and play computer games. In some ways, Ryan was a typical 13-year-old. But in other ways, Ryan was different. As a young child, he was diagnosed with a learning disability. He struggled in school and attended Special Education classes until the fifth grade. He also had trouble with his motor skills. As a result, Ryan was uncoordinated and physically weaker than the other boys at school.

 Ryan was bullied for the first time in fifth grade. One kid in particular began to tease him for being clumsy and “slow.” John encouraged his son to ignore the bully, but the taunts continued. Others had joined in too. Finally, in seventh grade, Ryan asked his father to teach him self-defense. John agreed and soon after, Ryan and the bully had a fight at a local park. Ryan was proud of himself for landing a few punches. The strategy seemed to work. The bully backed off and the boys even became friendly.

 But then, as John learned through Ryan’s online friends, towards the end of the school year, someone started a rumor that Ryan was gay. The story sparked a feeding frenzy. Ryan was teased and ridiculed every day at school. At home, the attacks continued late into the evening as Ryan sat alone in his room at the computer. He was now the target of an online bullying campaign that continued well into the summer. Hour after hour, Ryan was called a “fag,” “loser,” and worse. Ryan’s former nemesis-the boy he’d fought at the park-was one of the ringleaders.

 This time, Ryan could not use his fists to defend himself. He could not fight off so many people at once. Already broken and humiliated, the final blow came when a popular girl began to flirt with Ryan online. She convinced Ryan she had a crush on him. But when school began and Ryan approached her in person, she told him it was all a joke. In front of her friends, she laughed and called him a loser.

 Ryan was crushed.

 “It’s girls like you who make me want to kill myself,” he told her. On October 7th, he did just that.

 In the weeks following his son’s death, John would find folder after folder of conversations that Ryan had saved on his computer. They show Ryan’s desperate attempts to defend himself against the cyberbullying. Over time, more of Ryan’s classmates came forward to tell what they knew. It appears that nearly all of the students at Ryan’s school were aware of the bullying campaign. Almost no one defended him while it was happening.

 “Clearly I made a mistake putting that computer in Ryan’s room,” Ryan’s father admits. “Ryan had these online relationships that were invisible to me.” In hindsight, he wished he’d kept a closer eye on Ryan. He wishes Ryan had confided in him. But what about those that *did* know? Those who stood by and said nothing? Would Ryan have survived if more people had spoken up on his behalf?

 Ryan was a sweet and gentle kid, a 13-year-old boy who, just like Megan Meier was far too young to die.

 Sadly, while you’re reading this, cyberbullying continues. It’s even more common now than when Ryan and Megan were at school. Young people will experience it today. Perhaps they are in your community, your school, or even your class. If you see them, remember Megan and Ryan. And stand up for your peers.