

School Faculty and Staff Youth Suicide Prevention Training

From Changing Minds

I Survived

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I couldn't keep my eyes open. The woman in front of me was fading in and out of my vision as my eyelids drooped. I couldn't feel anything. It was as if I had been dropped in a tub of gelatin, moving in slow motion.

"Last night I wanted to kill myself."

I was sitting in the high school guidance counselor's office, sixteen years old. The night before I had another fight with my friend. Most people don't think about offing themselves because of a teenage fight. Truth is I wanted to kill myself for the last year. I just needed an excuse to say it out loud.

I was constantly reaching for this idea of the perfect person, but I could never achieve it. Living in a two-bedroom apartment where I shared a room with my sister, I was drowning in the circumstances of my life—things I couldn't control.

"And you had a plan?"

I had a plan, a theoretical plan that involved either A.) Jumping in front of a car or B.) Slicing my wrists until I bled out. Killing myself never felt like an action I would complete, but more like

a concept I enjoyed pondering at 4 in the morning. Maybe if I lay in bed long enough I'd stop existing.

"I had a plan."

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I was sitting in the corner of the day room, with its fluorescent lighting and concrete walls covered in finger paint. There was a picture of a fish with a big smile on his face, and I wanted to climb into the painting, shut my eyes, and let the waves take me away.

My mind kept traveling back to the night before, when I was first checked into the ward.

I heard it first. Then I saw it. There was a boy with burns all over his body, no ears, and eyes that looked like a skeleton's. He slammed another patient against the wall opposite me, and I jumped back in surprise, as if the skeleton boy would suddenly decide I was his next target. I felt tears prickling behind my eyelids.

I'd only been on the ward thirty minutes, but I felt like I was in hell.

The nurse tapped at her clipboard and wrote something down. I was already told to interact more with the other patients, and the fact that I *couldn't* get myself to do that made me feel like a failure. I couldn't even be a perfect hospital patient.

I was trying to finish *Of Mice and Men*. Lennie had just killed a puppy because he pet it too hard, but I kept crying. I must have cried for at least the first three days of treatment. Sometimes I didn't even know why I was crying.

All I kept thinking was, 'I wish I killed myself,' because I didn't want colleges to find out I was there. I imagined the nurses sending a memo to every college in the country: Caitlin's crazy! Don't admit her!

It had been days since I checked my grades, and I normally checked them once an hour. I couldn't do any of that here. I couldn't calculate my GPA, although I tried once during our 'math class' in the ward.

I vowed that I would kill myself for real next time. I would tell no one. The thought stayed in my mind while I talked to the psychiatrist there.

"One day you're going to be at an Ivy League school with your grades," she said. It was the first positive thing a staff member had said to me on the ward. I told her that I didn't plan to graduate high school. I knew that I'd die before then.

2014

It was the senior award ceremony. I was sitting in my cap and gown that I never thought I'd have a chance to wear. I remember secretly holding out hope that I'd win an award.

Then my favorite teacher, Mrs. Galambos, took the podium to announce the English Department Award. I'd already tuned out at this point. Even though English was my favorite class,

I'd always told myself I wasn't any good at it. I was going to college for psychology, because I knew that I couldn't make a career out of writing, even though I loved it.

“This particular student not only cares about equality for the students around her, but is excellent at analyzing literature from a psychological lens.”

I knew that she was talking about me—my term paper psychoanalyzed King Claudius in Hamlet, and I repeatedly wrote about my own mental health problems in the class—but when she announced my name, I was still shocked. I was trying not to cry, and I didn't. The tears stayed behind my eyelids. My writings about mental illness meant something to her, and maybe they could mean something to other people.

All the students were surprised. I wasn't the student that was known for excelling in English. But I was validated in that moment for my passion, and suddenly reading *Of Mice and Men* in the psych ward seemed worthwhile. I didn't even think I'd live to graduate high school, and earning that award made me feel like my life meant something.

I write my story so that others struggling with suicidal thoughts know that the world doesn't end just because you seek help. If I killed myself, I'd never have won that award. I'd never get to advocate for mental illness. I wouldn't have gone to college.

You never know just where your life will take you.

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Group Discussion Questions

- **How did Caitlin's initial year-long silence on her suicidal thinking affect her?**
- **How did Caitlin's life change after she spoke out?**
- **What would you say to Caitlin if you knew she was in suicidal crisis?**
- **Where would you turn for help if a student were in suicidal crisis?**
- **What was Mrs. Galambos' impact on Caitlin's life?**