



# Loss Control Insights

Cyberbullying

## REAL LIFE STORIES

### **Cyber Bullying Stories: The Ryan Halligan Case (1989 – 2003)**

The Cyber bullying Story: the website operated by Ryan's parents, John and Kelly Halligan, early concerns about Ryan's speech, language and motor skills development led to him receiving special education services from pre-school through the fourth grade. Ryan's academic and physical struggles made him the regular target of a particular bully at school between the fifth and seventh grade. In February 2003, a fight between Ryan and the bully not only ended the harassment at school, but led to a supposed friendship.

However, after Ryan shared an embarrassing personal story, the newly found friend returned to being a bully and used the information to start a rumor that Ryan was gay. The taunting continued into the summer of 2003, although Ryan thought that he had struck a friendship with a pretty, popular girl through AOL Instant Messenger (AIM). Instead, he later learned that the girl and her friends thought it would be funny to make Ryan think the girl liked him and use it to have him share more personally embarrassing material—which was copied and pasted into AIM exchanges with her friends.

On October 7, 2003, Ryan hung himself in the family bathroom. After his son's death, John discovered a folder filled with IM exchanges throughout that summer that made him realize "that technology was being utilized as weapons far more effective and reaching [than] the simple ones we had as kids."

### **The Cyber bullying Story: Megan Meier**

In December 2007, Tina Meier founded the nonprofit Megan Meier Foundation. The non-profit was named in honor of Tina's 13-year-old daughter who hanged herself in a bedroom closet in October 2006.

Megan struggled with attention deficit disorder and depression in addition to issues with her weight. About five weeks before her death, a 16-year-old boy named Josh Evans asked Megan to be friends on the social networking website MySpace. The two began communicating online regularly, although they never met in person or spoke on the phone. "Megan had a lifelong struggle with weight and self-esteem," Tina said on the Foundation website. "And now she finally had a boy who she thought really thought she was pretty."

In mid-October, Josh began saying he didn't want to be friends anymore, and the messages became more cruel on October 16, 2006, when Josh concluded by telling Megan, "The world would be a better place without you." The cyberbullying escalated when additional classmates and friends on MySpace began writing disturbing messages and bulletins. Tina said on the Foundation website that it was about 20 minutes after Megan went to her room after leaving the computer that the mother found her daughter had hanged herself in her bedroom closet. Megan died the following day, three weeks before what would have been her 14th birthday. Many cyberbullying articles were written on what was revealed to be another cruel prank tuned into one of the most tragic suicide stories.

### *Aftermath*

According to the Associated Press, it was later that fall when a neighbor informed Megan's parents that Josh was not a real person. Instead, the account was created by another neighbor, Lori Drew, her 18-year-old temporary employee Ashley Grills, and Drew's teenage daughter, who used to be friends with Megan. One

year later, the case began receiving national attention. While the county prosecutor declined to file any criminal charges in the case, federal prosecutors charged her with one count of conspiracy and three violations of the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act for accessing protected computers without authorization. A federal grand jury indicted Drew on all four counts in 2008, but U.S. District Judge George Wu acquitted Drew in August 2009 and vacated the conviction.

### **Cyber Bullying Stories: The Cyber bullying Cases of Jessica Logan (1990 – 2008) and Hope Witsell (1996 – 2009)**

Jessica Logan was an 18-year-old Sycamore High School senior who sent a nude photo of herself to her boyfriend, but the Cincinnati Enquirer reported that the photo was sent to hundreds of teenagers in at least seven Cincinnati-area high schools after the couple broke up. According to the University of Alabama's cyber bullying website, the cyber bullying continued through Facebook, MySpace and text messages. Jessica hanged herself after attending the funeral of another boy who had committed suicide.

A little more than one year later, 13-year-old Hope Sitwell hanged herself after a compromising picture of hers that she "sexted" to her boyfriend was shared amongst students at six different schools in the area of Ruskin, Florida, friends and family told CNN. Hope never told her parents about the "Hope Hater Page" that was started on MySpace that led to additional cyber bullying.

#### *Aftermath*

The Enquirer reported that Jessica's parents, Albert and Cynthia Logan, filed a lawsuit against Sycamore High School and the Montgomery police for allegedly not doing enough to keep their daughter from being bullied and harassed following the nude photos of her being widely shared. In February 2012, Ohio Governor John Kasich signed House Bill 116, also known as the Jessica Logan Act, into law. The legislation addresses cyber bullying and expands anti-harassment policies. Reuters reported that Hope's parents filed a lawsuit in April 2011 against Hillsborough County school officials for allegedly failing to take appropriate action after learning the teen had suicidal thoughts.