

“  
**J** *Lighten up,*  
IT WAS JUST A  
**JOKE.**”

---

Or so they said. But in an environment where words hurt much more than sticks or stones, jokes can go a little too far.

“SOMETIMES  
PEOPLE ARE  
CONDITIONED  
TO ACCEPT  
**CERTAIN**  
**BEHAVIORS.**”

*English teacher  
Stacey Cler*

# SIX

By Ashmita Chakraborty, Neha Ramchandani and Namrata Ramani

miles away from MVHS, Saratoga High School sophomore Audrie Pott went to a small party at a friend's house. According to the Rolling Stone article "Sexting, Shame and Suicide," she was drunk, but that did not justify the actions of the three boys who allegedly proceeded to sexually violate her, draw on her exposed body and text pictures of her in that state to their friends. As revealed by her subsequent online conversations, it was clear that Pott was severely humiliated and alienated by her so-called friends. A week later, she took her life.

SHS is not very different from MVHS; students at both schools are high achievers, get into top-tier colleges and win prestigious awards. But on the other hand, there are students at both schools who are alienated, harmed and bullied.

The United States Department of Justice estimates that one in four students across the nation have been victims of bullying. But when students at MVHS were asked whether they believed bullying was prevalent on campus, they responded with comments like "Bullying? Bullying doesn't happen at Monta Vista."

## THE WAY IT IS DEFINED

Bullying, according to the Department of Justice, is defined by two major characteristics: "repeated harmful attacks" and "an imbalance of power." However, accord-

ing to student advocate Richard Prinz, bullying is bullying when the victim defines it as so.

English teacher Stacey Cler attributes people's misconception of bullying at MVHS to their failure to recognize when a joke has become hurtful.

"Sometimes people are conditioned to accept certain behaviors," Cler said. "I'm sure you'll find people who don't necessarily consider what they're doing as bullying because they don't look at it that way."

In other words, bullies often justify their actions as mere joking. Senior Sriram Atluri, who has witnessed the exclusion of minority students from social circles, believes that students often make inappropriate jokes without consideration for the person on the receiving end. Atluri acknowledges that while the bully may fail to recognize the consequences of his or her behavior, the intention is ultimately irrelevant. All that matters is the damage the bully inflicts.

Of the students who have witnessed bullying at MVHS, 30 percent say that it pertains to grades.

Different forms of academic bullying, like the peer pressure students feel in order to remain competitive against their peers, seem to blind students from other methods of harassment at MVHS — including physical and verbal, as well as non-confrontational forms like rumor-spreading and exclusion.

## ASK ME ANYTHING

For junior Mane Mikayelyan, the hate started in middle school when she created an account on Formspring.me, a website that allowed anonymous people to

**Q: HAVE YOU EVER WITNESSED  
BULLYING IN ANY FORM AT MVHS?**

69% Yes

31% No

**Q: HOW HAVE YOU  
WITNESSED BULLYING?**

**36**

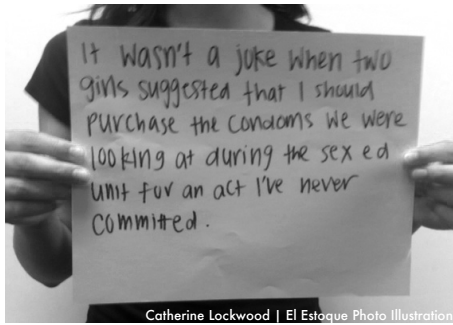
PERCENT  
verbal

**26**

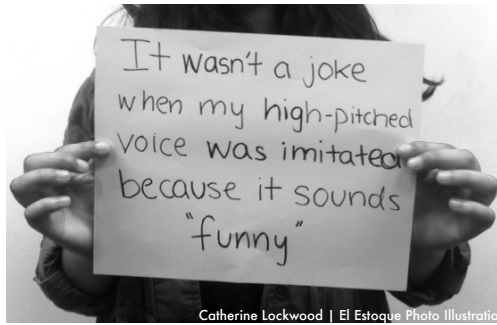
PERCENT  
cyber

**9**

PERCENT  
physical



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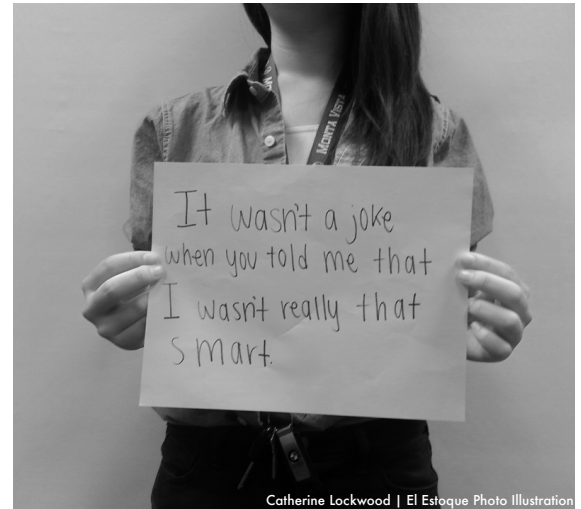
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ask questions to users of the site. The website was relatively new at the time and, according to Mikayelyan, very popular. Soon after she made her account, Mikayelyan's inbox was crowded with offensive messages stating profanities and obscenities regarding her appearance and personal life.

"You're ugly, you're fat, you're a slut — the typical 'girl' insults," Mikayelyan said. "But how could they call me a slut when I was only in middle school?"

She admits that after a while of seeing these derogatory comments posted on her profile, she started to allow them to get to her.

"I started to think, 'If this many people think that I'm like that, then it must be true,'" she said.

Mikayelyan is not alone in her damaging experience with Formspring. On Feb. 13, 2011, 15-year-old Natasha MacBryde of the United Kingdom committed suicide after receiving malicious comments on her Formspring account. Facing public scrutiny, Formspring was shut down, only to reboot two months later under the name Spring.me.

At MVHS, Mikayelyan says that anonymous haters often targeted her position as a cheerleader because they had something against the team or her personally. She believes that anonymous people who write hateful comments are insecure, unable to muster the courage to speak their mind directly in front of victims.

While Mikayelyan realized that she couldn't stop anonymous users from putting negative comments on her profile, she decided to be strong and stand up against the accusations. She acknowledged that many believe

making accounts and replying to hate-filled messages on sites such as Formspring and Ask.fm is the best way to prevent and stop bullying.

"The reason I answer [every question I get], regardless of how dumb or mean they are, is that I don't want them to think that 'she didn't know what to say, I really got to her,'" Mikayelyan said. "I think that not responding is a form of weakness. If you don't stand up for yourself, you're saying that you have nothing to say, and that you don't know how to respond."

#### A JOKE TAKEN TOO FAR

While Mikayelyan suffered from anonymous hate, senior Zac Burke was subject to a more physical form of bullying.

Burke transferred to Kennedy Middle School in eighth grade. When he secured a solid group of friends, however, one supposed friend's hostility quickly shadowed Burke's excitement at being able to fit in. What started off as rude joking soon spiraled into malicious, anti-Semitic slurs and even physical attacks on Burke.

"[The bully] thought that everything was a joke," Burke said. "He had absolutely no control; he knew no limit."

Burke believes that he never did anything to cause the bullying and never retaliated when the bully physically hurt him.

STORIES DEPICTED ABOVE WERE SUBMITTED BY STUDENTS THROUGH TUMBLR; HOWEVER, THE PHOTOS ARE OUR OWN.

ALL SURVEY STATISTICS COME FROM AN ONLINE SURVEY OF 349 STUDENTS.



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# WHAT CAN YOU? DO

BY TANISHA DASHMUNSHI AND RUBA SHAIK

**Advice from MVHS Student Advocate Richard Prinz for students who feel bullied, as well as peers, family members and teachers of potential victims**

## IF YOU ARE A TEACHER

Be aware of students' interactions and encourage an atmosphere of mutual respect. Speak to the kids separately when trying to understand what happened. Don't act on assumptions, like accusing students, until you know the whole story. Get involved — speak to the students, or refer them to their guidance counselors or the school psychologists. This ensures that the victim is getting needed support and that the bully is being held accountable. Intervening immediately is the best plan of action.

Take the time to look for signs of your children being bullied, like changes in their behavior. It's important to be respectful of their feelings, and take care not to minimize the situation. Instead of saying "Just ignore it" or "Just walk away," take your child seriously if they speak to you. Taking action is always better than the passive approach.

## IF YOU ARE A PARENT

Don't be a bystander. If you are aware of the bullying, then you are just as involved. Be willing to step in and stop the bullying, either directly or indirectly. Your silence will in turn give the bully more power. If you are afraid of being targeted or are friends with the bully, you have to be willing to say, "This is more important to me than having friends." Most of the time you will come out of the situation in a better place.

## IF YOU FEEL YOU ARE BECOMING A BULLY

If you start to realize that you're harming people, then you should go to a counselor and get help. Prinz believes that there are often underlying emotional problems that bullies have not dealt with — like having been bullied themselves before — that pushes them to find power. If this is the case then you need to find a way to connect with people in a healthier way, so it's not a power struggle. Admitting that there is a problem is the first step and after that, you're on your way to getting help. Bullies tend to make excuses for their actions so that they're not held accountable for the impact they

## IF YOU FEEL BULLIED

The most important thing to do is to talk to someone — your parents and trusted friends or the trained professionals listed below.

**RICHARD PRINZ, STUDENT ADVOCATE**  
(408) 366 - 7638  
richard\_prinz@fuhdsd.org

**BETH PROUDFOOT\*, PSYCHOLOGIST**  
(408) 351 - 1044  
beth@childfamilygroup.com

**BRIAN SACKETT\*, PSYCHOLOGIST**  
(408) 257 - 6662  
brain@connectingself.com

*\* These psychologists are contributors to MVHS Verdadera and they specialize in issues pertaining to bullying*

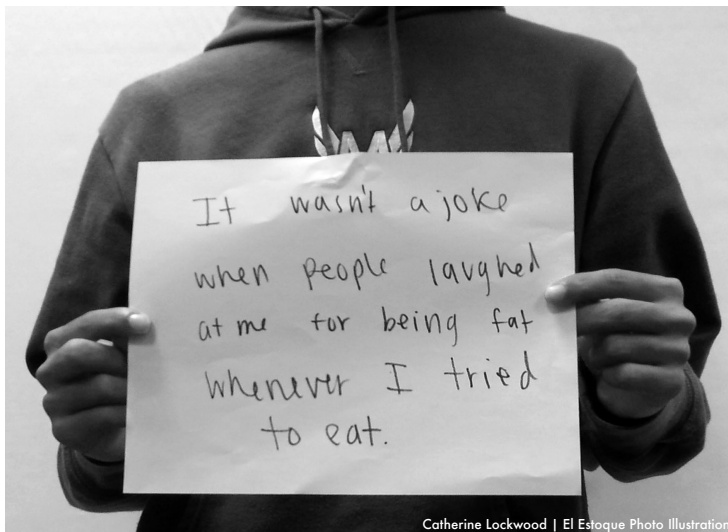
If you feel uncomfortable speaking to someone, you can remain anonymous and still maintain a support system by seeking help online or through hotlines.

**Teen Hotline:** (800) 852-8336  
**Anti-Hate:** (408) 279-0111  
**No Bullying Live Empowered (NoBLE):** (855) 876-6253.

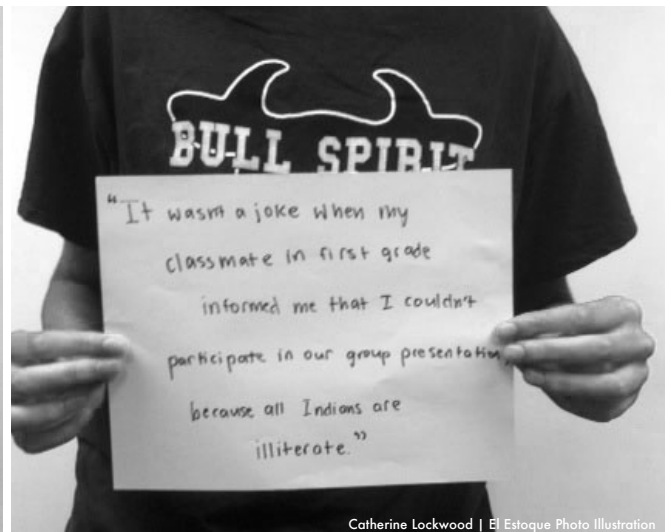
**\*Bullying crisis chat:**  
<http://commongroundhelps.org/>  
**\*Online support group:**  
<http://teenlineonline.org/>

*\*Recommended by the NoBLE program, which supports victims of bullying by providing counseling services.*

[t.dashmunshi@elestoque.org](mailto:t.dashmunshi@elestoque.org) | [r.shaik@elestoque.org](mailto:r.shaik@elestoque.org)



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**Q: WHAT ARE MVHS STUDENTS USUALLY BULLIED ABOUT?**

grades	30%
physical appearance	29%
sexual orientation	11%
religious beliefs	6%

*continued from pg. 27*

He recalls his bully, who weighed at least 120 pounds more than him, sitting on him for an extended period of time, to the point that Burke couldn't breathe. After suffering through months of torment, he felt physically sick — nauseated and anxious — to go to school.

"The final straw for me, ironically, was when he stabbed me with a straw, and he stabbed me so hard in the back of the

neck that it not only knocked me around but also left bloody marks," Burke said. "At that point I had been physically and mentally harmed, and I don't think I deserved any of it."

Prior to this, Burke had approached his assistant principal in freshman year and pointed out where in the planner his bully had violated the policy on harassment and bullying. The planner reads, "Students who engage harassment or bullying shall be subject to suspension/Sheriff notification and/or expulsion from school" in bold type. Burke insisted his bully had met most of the criteria listed in the planner that recommended expulsion. However, according to Burke, his bully initially faced no consequences.

From a national standpoint, the perceived lack of reaction from the administration is not uncommon. According to a survey conducted by the Department of Justice, 66 percent of victims of bullying felt that their school administration responded poorly to bullying problems.

While the MVHS administration could not comment specifically on Burke's case, Dean of Students Nico Flores explained the process that the administration takes to resolve a bullying incident. The first goal of the administration is to try to work out the situation by establishing some sort of common ground between the victim and the bully. During this process, all adults involved in the situation — parents, teachers and, if the situation warrants it, the sheriff's office — will convene to reach an agreement. Only if there is a serious threat to the victim's safety has the bully violated zero tolerance and faces possible suspension or expulsion. Due to student confidentiality, Flores notes that sometimes a victim will not be notified

about the consequences faced by the bully.

"Our goal isn't to punish, it's to educate," Flores said. "Once it starts to become punitive, then I think the lesson isn't learned."

Frustrated and having endured physical torment, Burke met with his guidance counselor, who contacted the Sheriff's Office. The bully was charged with two felonies and had to carry out community service and therapy, in addition to expulsion from the school.

Burke's story represents the minority of cases at MVHS; only 9 percent of students have witnessed physical bullying. Yet, the emotions he felt — the humiliation, the blow to self-confidence, the frustration — are prevalent regardless of the form of bullying.

In spite of the ordeal that Burke faced, he believes that his experience has shaped him as a person. Burke developed a relationship with the deputy in charge of his case, and describes her as his second mother. With a renewed sense of self-confidence, he fortified his desire to become a police officer.

He even shared his story at SHS's memorial for Pott.

"I didn't plan to speak," Burke said. "I realized that since I had been bullied before — even though it was different people, different situations, the kid who bullied me did physical stuff and committed a crime. I figured I could offer something to her family and the people who knew her."

Burke's decision to take action was not easy to make. He had not informed his mother of the situation and was afraid that she would get worried. Furthermore, he feared that telling someone would label him as a snitch and heighten the bullying.

Looking back, Burke believes that telling someone —

“  
[THE BULLY] THOUGHT  
THAT **EVERYTHING**  
**WAS A JOKE.** HE HAD  
ABSOLUTELY NO CONTROL;  
HE KNEW NO LIMIT.”

whether a teacher, counselor, friend or administrator — may not undo the damage inflicted by the bully, but confiding in a trusted individual will help you improve the situation.

### THE BYSTANDER EFFECT

According to DoSomething, a non-profit that advocates social change, one in four teachers see nothing wrong with bullying and only intervene 4 percent of the time. Cler, however, makes it a point to intervene whenever she notices bullying.

According to Cler, it's often difficult for a teacher to know where or when to step in, but to remedy this, it is crucial for a teacher to develop a classroom environment conducive to open interaction where students can talk to the teacher without fear.

"As a teacher, you have to be aware of students' comfort levels, because those are particular to each student, and that's why it's important to get to know every student in your class," Cler said. "Every student's preferences are very different, and I think you need to try to get to know them and where their comfort zones are."

Bullying that takes place in the classroom often goes unnoticed because of a lack of communication between students and the teacher. This is due to victims, as well as bystanders, failing to address the situation. According to the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley, bystanders often shy away from a situation because no one else is doing anything about it. No one wants to be the snitch.

Cler also attributes the lack of teacher involvement to the fear of making a situation worse.

"For me, it's always a gamble — if I insert myself into a situation, it can go either way," Cler said. "I'm aware that my status as a teacher has the potential to change a situation, so I make it my goal to have a positive effect."

A victim's peers are as capable of changing a situation as teachers are. Yet only 33 percent of students at MVHS have intervened, either directly or indirectly, during a bullying incident they witnessed. Burke reflected that most of his friends were absent during his ordeal. Most of them were mutual friends with the bullies, and he does not blame them for not siding with him.

"It's a really awkward position, being friends with the bully and the victim," he said. "They knew what was going on, but how could they have mediated? Now we just don't talk about what happened to me."

Prinz underscores the value in helping peers out. Seven years ago, he recalls a student who was sexually abused as a freshman and was at the time embarrassed to share her story with anyone. With the encouragement of several friends and the desire to warn other freshman girls about sexual assault, the girl, who was then a senior, organized a "Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul" panel.

### PERMEATING RUMORS

"They say she lost her virginity."

A freshman girl, who spoke to El Estoque on the condition that she remain anonymous, stated that several accusatory rumors have been spread about one of her classmates.

According to the freshman, the bullying started when the victim was in middle school. The freshman said that the bullying was never conducted face-to-face, and that the victim is strongly affected by these baseless accusations but isn't open about the issue at hand. Although the victim has learned to hide the pain well, the freshman has said that as a witness, she wants to help the victim.

"Sometimes I want to go to the counselor, but I can't because

## Q&A THE MAKINGS OF A BULLY

*School psychologist Sheila Altmann describes the psyche of a bully*

BY YIFEI WU

**EL ESTOQUE:** What factors cause kids to bully?

**SHEILA ALTMANN:** Children growing up in abusive environments are more likely to become bullies. [Also,] if you are under pressure, and you need a release, or if you are angry and upset...the nearest and easiest thing you think you can get away with [is] bullying, [and] you strike out there. Anger or frustration or a sense of hopelessness or helplessness can all trigger bullying behavior.

**EE:** Is there such thing as a "bad kid"? Or are bullies bullies because of their circumstances?

**SA:** It is both nature and nurture. People are not born bullies, [but] personality is shaped by your temperament as well. [Kids] are born with certain tendencies that can be used either positively or negatively.

**EE:** Why do students bully?

**SA:** They often feel higher and more powerful by asserting power over weaker individuals...but underneath, there may be a sense of powerlessness [and] vulnerability.

**EE:** Do you think that bullies deserve sympathy?

**SA:** Sometimes they do. Sometimes it is a matter of understanding: why do they do this? It isn't that it excuses what they do; it is still unacceptable. They need help in understanding themselves, [and] why they do it. We should motivate people in the positive direction instead of in the direction that can [cause kids to] break the law...You can lead the bully to the right path by reinforcing [their] positive side.

**EE:** How does outside influence play a part?

**SA:** It could be that either the family doesn't give strong boundaries or consequences, so the child learns that he can do these things and feel a sense of power...They haven't learned that their behavior is not appropriate. Or it can be the opposite. [Maybe] the parents are so strict at home that the child feels that he has no control. So when he gets the opportunity [to] have the power over someone else, [it] is very appealing to him because he does not have control in another area of his life.

I know [the victim] doesn't want to talk about it," she said.

Flores emphasizes the importance of peers and teachers being a voice for victims. He believes that if a student feels that talking to an administrator is daunting they could consult their counselors, Prinz or even their friends.

"You have to be courageous, and you have to be willing to follow what you know in your heart is the right thing," he said. "And it's not so much what the outcome is going to be... it's more of 'I know this is right because it is impacting my life or it's impacting my friends or it's impacting my community.'"

The freshman stated that as a bystander herself, she wants other potential bystanders to take a stand against the spreading of rumors. She believes that it's important to step in especially if the situation becomes this serious even though the victim hasn't done anything to bring the bullying upon themselves.

"[The victim] doesn't deserve it at all," she said.

Like the victim, not everyone has someone to talk to, to share their pain with. Not everyone is cognizant of their peers and their feelings. Even though many students who were victims of bullying have learned to overcome what they went through, no one can begin to understand the emotions that drove Pott to take her life. Her bullies, who deny that their actions were bullying, thought that she should lighten up, it was just a joke. But it wasn't.

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