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The Bullying of Seth Walsh: Requiem for a Small-Town Boy

By Bryan Alexander / Tehachapi

Eleven-year-old Shawn Walsh paid a poignant tribute to the brother, just two years older, he had lost. Gripping a microphone as he stood at the altar of the First Baptist Church in Tehachapi, Calif., Shawn joshed that his brother could be "a pain in the butt" at times but that Seth was "the best big brother in the world — no, the galaxy." Wearing a yellow (Seth's favorite color) plaid shirt, Shawn then, without mentioning the word, made a heartbreaking reference to bullying, the specter at the heart of his family's mourning for his openly gay brother. "I always wanted to protect him," said Shawn, as sobs broke out in the church. "I just wish people could have been nice to him like my mom taught me."

People were not always nice to 13-year-old Seth Walsh. Neither his valiant younger brother Shawn nor the rest of his family could protect him from what they insist was chronic teasing. Even before Seth came out as gay, family and friends say, he was perpetually picked on for his mannerisms and his style of dressing. The bullying turned Seth Walsh to suicide, one of a spate of such deaths across the U.S. in the past two weeks. (See what happens when bullying goes criminal.)

On Sept. 19, his single mother Wendy found him unconscious; he had tried to hang himself from a tree in his backyard after another apparent bullying incident. He lingered on life support for more than a week. His death has since shattered emotions in this rural community 120 miles (190 km) north of Los Angeles. Close to 600 townspeople crammed into First Baptist on Friday, Oct. 1, to remember the teen who loved Pokémon, adored french fries above all other food and had an obsession with disco music. The church was so crowded that Pastor Ron Barker had mourners sit on the floor along the entire length of the middle aisle so everyone could find room inside the church. Still, many mourners gave up trying to enter. "Seth had friends that even this building could not contain," Barker said, smiling even as he knew the crowds in the church were a clear building violation. "My prayer for today is that the fire people don't show up."

Seth Walsh, 13

Seth's beautician mother Wendy, 44, did not speak at the service. ("It's hard," she told TIME afterward. "It's hard for everyone.") Wearing a black polka-dot dress, she occasionally wept into the shoulder of her father Jim, 65, who was seated next to Seth's two brothers (Shane, 17, and Shawn) and sister (Amanda, 18). But Wendy wrote a eulogy that the pastor read. It began with a story about Seth placing a freshly picked spring flower in offering to his late dog Kelly, whom the family had just buried. "After giving the flower to Kelly, he went back to the family of flowers and gave an offering to the flowers for sacrificing one of their own members," Barker read. "He was a blessing to us and all who knew him, a lesson to the world on how to treat one another." (See the case of Matthew Shepard.)

The pastor told TIME that the focus of the service was "going to be on Seth and his life, not on the bullying, and not on the homosexuality." But both subjects were clearly in evidence at the service. As part of a photo montage displayed on the white walls behind the altar, Seth was shown happily wearing a plastic tiara on his head. The next frame featured the word *bullying* with a red slash through it.

Seth's grandparents insist their grandson knew from an early age that he was gay. "Wendy did everything humanly possible to help him understand his world and to support him," Jim Walsh, a retired school principal, told TIME. "And so did his brothers and sister." But it was something young Seth had trouble accepting. "Initially he wanted to have a girlfriend," says grandmother Judy Walsh, a retired schoolteacher. "He wasn't happy with his orientation. He read the Bible a lot. This was not the way he wanted to live his life, but that's what he was dealt with."

Even before he came out, he was teased enough, his grandparents say, that he was homeschooled on two separate occasions. His best friend, Jamie Phillips, says Seth, who told friends he was gay last year, was harassed long before: "Since it was a rumor that went around, everyone thought he was gay." "He started getting teased by the fourth and fifth grade," says Judy Walsh. "By sixth grade, the kids were starting to get mean. By the seventh grade, he was afraid to walk home from school because he was afraid he would get harassed. As he was walking by a classroom, a kid yelled out, 'Queer.' Stuff like that."

The bullying took every form. "It was eye to eye, over the telephone, personal, over the Internet," says Judy. "He spent a lot of his life frightened." Seth's grandparents say the breaking point came after what they believe was a bullying incident in a local park on Sept. 19. After the incident, Seth appeared to be acting normally at home. He then showered and asked to borrow a pen from his mother to write. Then he said he was going to play with the dogs in the backyard. His horrified mother found him later at the tree and fought to save her child even though she suspected it was futile. "Wendy told me, when she put him on the ground, she knew his soul was gone," said Jim. The medical response teams did their best to revive him, heliporting Seth to the county's trauma center, where he remained on life support before dying Sept. 27.

Tehachapi police declined to discuss specifics of what they say is an ongoing investigation of the incident. Police Sergeant Kevin Paille did confirm that police were looking into possible instances of "bullying or hazing" centered on Walsh's sexuality. "We're trying to get a clear picture of the totality of the situation," he said.

The boy's death has left his grief-stricken family trying to find the positive in the tragedy. Jim Walsh points out that Seth's organs were donated following his death; a child in Los Angeles was saved after receiving Seth's heart. Meanwhile, the town has used the incident to preach understanding, this time with the nation as a stage. "We're just podunk Tehachapi," says Judy Walsh. "I don't expect to get calls from Ellen ... [she pauses to work on the name] ... DeGeneres or *60 Minutes*. The biggest regret is that this didn't happen before Seth's death." As Wendy wrote in her eulogy: "Seth is doing what he always wanted to do — to promote love."

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