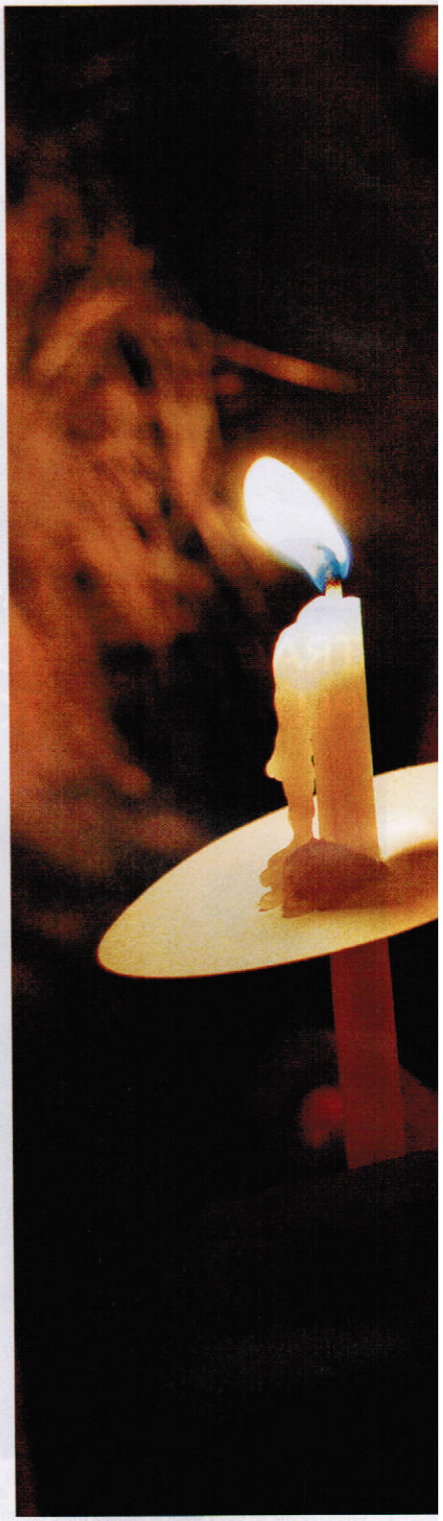
TECHNOLOGY

Bullied To Death?

In the past four weeks, four teenagers killed themselves after being harassed by schoolmates. Technology is quickly changing how kids bully one another. Here are some ways to stop the problem

BY JOHN CLOUD



Vigil for a son
At Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J., on Oct. 3, classmates remember Tyler Clementi

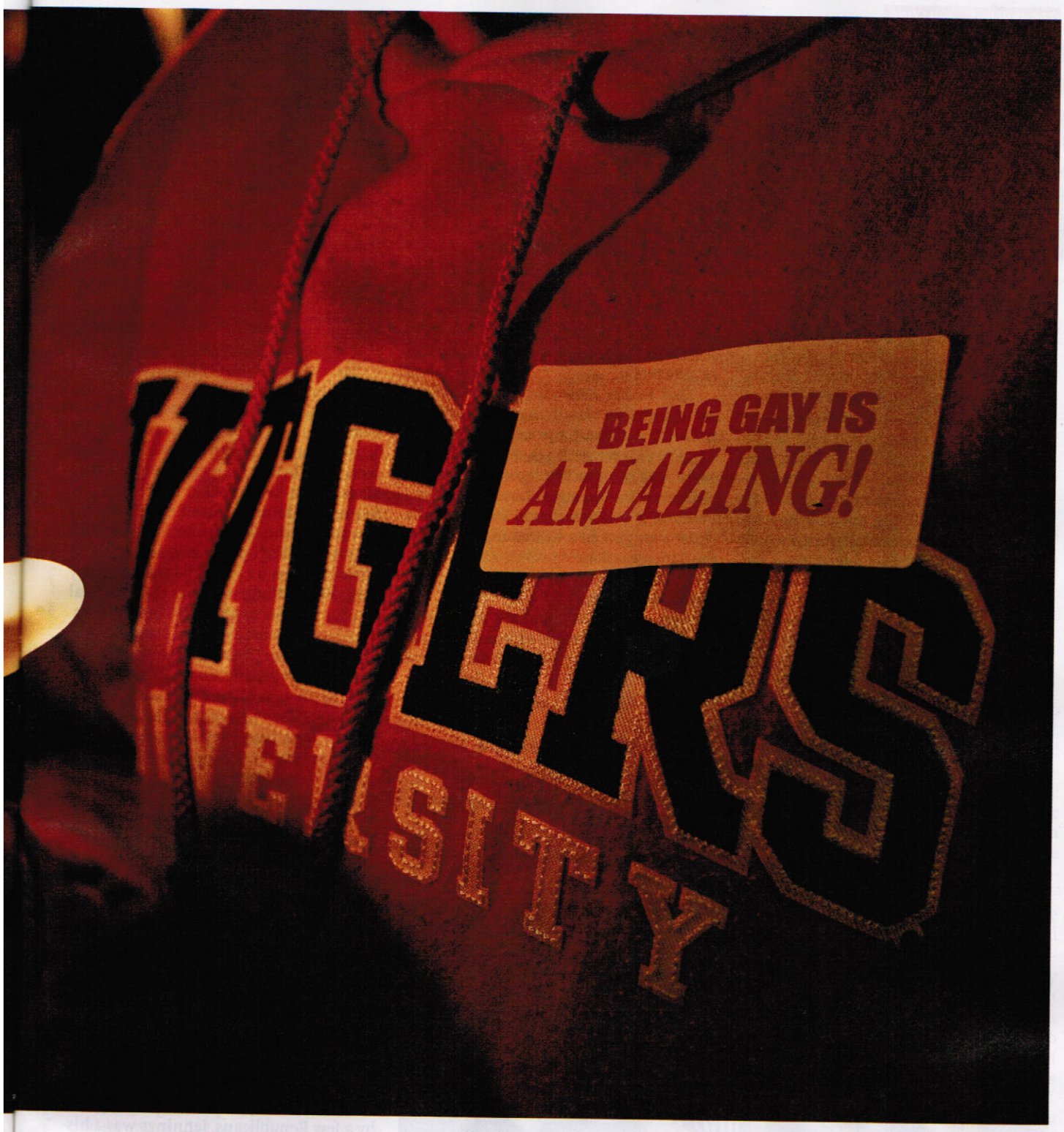
BULLIES CAN BE ANYWHERE, but there's no place they show up more than in schools, and no time more than in September. Once the academic year starts, the complicated social hierarchy of a campus—popular kids, nerdy kids, ADHD kids, nerdy ADHD kids who are popular because they sell Adderall—gets reinvented. But this fall the casual brutality of the schoolyard seems particularly bitter. In the past few weeks, at least three teenage boys—one in Houston, one in Greensburg, Ind., and one in a small central California city called Tehachapi—have committed suicide after being bullied. And, on Sept. 22, a freshman at Rutgers University, Tyler Clementi, threw himself from the George Washington Bridge in New York City. His roommate had secretly recorded a video of Clementi kissing a guy; the video went up on YouTube. On Facebook, Clementi offered a final status update: "jumping off gw bridge sorry."

All four communities have been torn over whether they could have done more to protect their sons. On Oct. 1, 600 people crammed the First Baptist Church in Tehachapi to remember Seth Walsh, a 13-year-old who liked Pokémon, dance music and reading the Bible—and who had (somewhat reluctantly) acknowledged to understanding family members and friends that he liked other boys. Seth had been teased relentlessly; it started when he was in fourth grade, according to his grandmother Judy Walsh. "By sixth grade, kids were starting to get mean," she says. "By seventh grade, he was afraid to walk home from school."

Seth hanged himself in his backyard on Sept. 19. His mother Wendy, a 44-year-old beautician, found his body. Seth was unable to extend her the mercy of dying quickly: a helicopter came, and he was on life support for nine days.

The four cases tumbled onto one another so quickly that they caught school officials across the country off guard. The education system has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in antibullying campaigns in the past decade. At least 42 states have passed laws against bullying—most since the 1999 massacre at Columbine High School in Colorado, where two troubled boys killed themselves and 13 others. The U.S. Department of Education opened its Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools

Photograph by Jason Fulford for TIME



15% of seventh- and eighth-graders consider themselves to be both victims and perpetrators of bullying. That presents a chicken-and-egg problem

in 2002, and just last month Secretary of Education Arne Duncan hosted a Bullying Prevention Summit in Washington, where he noted that, even in this economic climate, President Obama had asked for a 12% increase in funding for antibullying programs.

The trouble is, the technology of bullying has advanced much faster than efforts to stop it ever could. If you have a cell phone, you can post to your entire school that a girl is a slut or a boy is a fag—and you can attach an unflattering photo or video of them to try to prove it. At least bullies of previous decades had to hold you down before they could spit in your face.

Researchers have a hard time measuring how common bullying is because there's no single definition. Is bullying only verbal, or does there have to be a physical act? If you hear a schoolyard taunt that you know how to brush off, were you bullied or just annoyed? Does it have to be repeated behavior to count as bullying, or can it happen just once? Does it have to disrupt a whole class, or can it affect only one or two kids? None of this is clear to those who study and make laws to prevent bullying. Most state laws differ on the precise motivations and consequences required for a harassing event to count as bullying. If one 12-year-old boy taunts another, most state laws wouldn't call it bullying unless there is both demonstrable harm—the victim is injured (at least psychologically)—and demonstrable intent. In other words, for a bully to be a bully, he can't have just been any insensitive kid. He had to *want* to hurt his classmate.

Accurately adjudicating these events is difficult—sometimes impossible—particularly now that insults can be delivered in nanoseconds via handhelds. One especially revealing study was presented last year at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, a nonpartisan think tank. A team led by Professor Robert Gable of Johnson & Wales University, which is based in Providence, R.I., found that 74% of seventh- and eighth-graders think of themselves as neither cyberbullies (a term defined in the study as online harassers who intend to hurt another person) nor victims of cyberbullying. Only 5% in the study said they were victims; another 6% said they were bullies. The remaining 15% described themselves as both victims *and* victimizers.

That makes sense: there is a chicken-and-egg quality to bullying—you get hurt, and then you exact a price for it. And today, if you have so much as a Twitter account, you can exact that price in just 140 characters before any school official has a chance to talk you down. You post your worst thoughts in a heated moment, and the damage is done.

Safe Sexuality

ALL FOUR OF SEPTEMBER'S BULLYING-related suicides involved young people who were either out of the closet or were assumed to be gay. But bullying is also a problem for straight kids. In January, an Irish immigrant named Phoebe Prince used the scarf her sister had given her for Christmas to hang herself above a stairwell in her South Hadley, Mass., home. Prince had been dating a popular boy in school and was called an "Irish whore"; someone threw a can of Red Bull at her from a car. Some of Prince's tormenters posted obnoxious messages about her after she died. Three of her former classmates, all girls, are set to be tried later this fall for violating Prince's civil rights. But legal maneuvering might push the trial to next year or prevent it altogether.

At least the bullies of previous decades had to hold you down before they could spit in your face

Such cases get murky very quickly, not least when victims and victimizers are in close quarters. At Rutgers, young Clementi was said to be openly, contentedly gay to some and tightly closeted to others (a double life that many gay people recognize). When he arrived at Rutgers in late August, he found himself paired with a roommate who was uncomfortable with people who are openly gay, according to Robert O'Brien, a 43-year-old anthropology instructor at Rutgers who is the principal faculty liaison to the gay-student community. Clementi then complained to his resident adviser (RA) that he and his roommate weren't getting along.

O'Brien says Clementi didn't get far. "Many students have told the administration here that they feel unsafe, and they have gotten no movement on their claims," says O'Brien. Rutgers has said that all of Clementi's complaints were taken seriously and that it's unclear what, exactly, Clementi reported to his RA. But the Prince and Clementi cases both raise a larger question: Why can't we recognize warning signs in bullying cases and stop it before the victim makes an irrevocable decision?

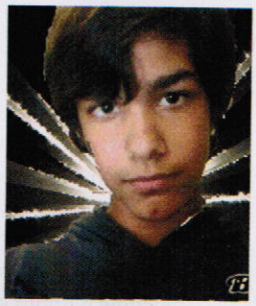
One reason is a problem of research. "We just don't have great data," says Kevin Jennings, the director of President Obama's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools. That office was founded under George W. Bush, but Jennings has given it a higher profile because he is a former gay activist whose appointment was opposed by a few Republicans. Jennings was a history teacher who founded the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network, which registers and advises the gay-friendly school groups known as gay-straight alliances. According to Jennings, Massachusetts and Vermont are the only states that gather statistics on anti-gay bullying.

Partly because of Jennings' efforts, the federal government has stepped into the data breach and is now collecting figures on all forms of bullying. But researchers

Remembering Seth *Mourners at Walsh's Oct. 1 service at First Baptist in Tehachapi, Calif.*

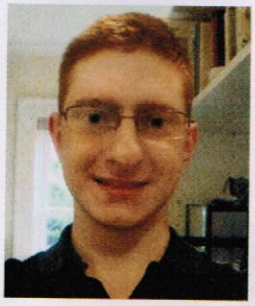
THIS PAGE: HENRY A. BARRIOS—ZUMA; OPPOSITE PAGE: WILLIAM LUCAS—FACEBOOK; TYLER CLEMENTI—FACEBOOK; ASHER BROWN: HAMILTON MIDDLE SCHOOL; SETH WALSH—FACEBOOK

19 Days. 4 Suicides. Hectored by classmates and struggling to fit in, these four kids ended their lives in September



SEPT. 9

William Lucas, 15
Greensburg, Ind.
Known as Billy, William was a freshman at Greensburg High. He hanged himself in his family's barn. His friends told local reporters he had been bullied repeatedly. On a Facebook tribute page, one friend left this comment: "Everyone made fun of him at school, and he couldn't take it anymore."



SEPT. 22

Tyler Clementi, 18
New York City
Tyler and his new roommate at Rutgers didn't get along, and Tyler felt threatened. His roommate began spying on him electronically and eventually posted a video of Tyler kissing a guy. Tyler posted a final Facebook status update: "jumping off gw bridge sorry."

SEPT. 23

Asher Brown, 13
Houston
Using one of his stepfather's guns, Asher shot himself in the head last month. His parents say he had been bullied about his assumed homosexuality as well as his inability to afford nice clothes.

SEPT. 28

Seth Walsh, 13
Tehachapi, Calif.
Seth struggled with his sexuality by reading the Bible. Eventually, he admitted to friends and family members that he liked other boys. But he still couldn't fit in. He was bullied relentlessly and hanged himself. His mother found his body and watched him die after he spent more than a week on life support.

still don't fully understand what determines who will become a bully and who won't. Home life obviously has something to do with it, along with relationships at school, but this constellation of factors isn't easy to reduce to clear lines of cause and effect. Are bullies sad or vindictive or—more likely—a bit of both? There has never been a single diagnostic definition.

It's similarly hard to determine the effectiveness of antibullying curriculums. One of the most widely adopted programs, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, began in Norway; its American version is based at Clemson University in South Carolina. Olweus has shown some success in getting kids to bully less, but because it was first developed in the 1980s, it predates the new technology of bullying. Many who have been trained in the Olweus program try to talk bullies down; one recommended technique is to ask, in an open-ended way, what has made bullies so angry, which can turn out to be physical and sexual abuse at home. But in the social-media age, there is often no time for such exploratory conversations.

And yet school districts that find themselves in a media conflagration over a bullying case can have little choice but to spend money on one of the older prevention programs. In Wyoming, home to several bullying cases since the 1998 murder of 21-year-old Matthew Shepard, who was tortured and left to die in part because he was gay, the Natrona County School District has used part of the state's stimulus funding to buy into a program called Bullying Hurts, which was started by a Wyoming rodeo clown. The rodeo clown, Marvin Nash, 55, does a good job of holding little kids' attention during his seminars. (He runs from bulls—get it?) But while well intended, the program has no objective data proving it is effective in preventing the new kinds of bullying done instantaneously in social media. According to Marty Wood, director of student-support services for Natrona schools, the Bullying Hurts program costs $1,000 per school. But the results of a research project his district is conducting with the University of Hawaii examining how social media is changing bullying won't be available until November.

Keeping the Peace

SO WHAT'S A BETTER APPROACH? THE FACT that more kids consider themselves both bullies and victims than think they are in either category alone provides some guidance. Social scientists have found that programs that build from within schools and work with both victims and bullies have more success than programs that ridicule bullies from the outside.

One proven strategy is for districts to invest in a school resource officer (SRO), whose main duty is to patrol halls and connect with kids. It's a tricky job, because the SRO must own that delicate middle space between authority figure and friend. But studies of schools with such officers show that those schools have lower rates of violence than schools without them. Again, there's a chicken-and-egg question: maybe those schools were already less violent. But another good prevention strategy that SROs can facilitate is to target bystanders: the majority who neither bully nor get bullied but just watch—and maybe text their friends about it. "A lot of bystanders are afraid to step in," says Barbara Coloroso, author of *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander.* "It's up to adults to set an example."

For parents, a good strategy is to show no fear—not to be bullied, in effect, by new technology. "I tell parents all the time: the machines are not the issue. The behavior is the issue," says Jennings of the Obama Administration. "Hateful behavior is never appropriate, no matter whether it happens online or in person. The idea that one is different from the other is the major problem." In short, it is incivility, wherever it occurs, that launches what can become a vicious bullying cycle. —WITH REPORTING BY BRYAN ALEXANDER/TEHACHAPI ■