

Ryan's Story Presentation Overall Script and Flow for the Student Version

There will be a brief introduction of me usually performed by an administrator or group of students actively involved in some bullying prevention club or effort. I will provide a script.

I start off by saying, "Before I begin to tell Ryan's story, I want first to introduce Ryan to you." I then launch a video showing short clips and stills of Ryan throughout his life. My technology needs from the school are a projector, screen and sound system to plug into my laptop.

After the video, I will then appear on stage again to tell Ryan's story. (My computer will switch to a looped slide show of pictures of Ryan as I tell the story.) The overall story is told in an engaging way and follows most of what is written on the website. Included in the presentation and not on the website is what happened when I confronted both the girl and the boy involved in the bullying. In these moments the students will get a powerful message that we did not blame them for Ryan's suicide because we believe suicide is a much more complicated issue and that we do not believe someone would kill themselves just because someone was mean to them. We believe that there was an underlying mental health problem that preconditioned Ryan to respond in this extreme way. But they will also get the message that you never know how much someone is already hurting; especially from an underlying mental health issue and that you would never want to be the one to push someone over the edge. In telling the story, they will also gain insight into how parents and siblings are affected by a family member being bullied. The story telling part of the presentation takes about 50 minutes.

At the end of the story, the students will be given a chance to stand and stretch. At this point, some usually express support for a friend with a hug. It gives them an opportunity to take a breather from the emotional roller coaster ride they just took with me.

After a few minutes of the stand and stretch break, I will reappear on stage and ask them to come back to attention. At this point, I will say, "For the time we have left together, you can ask me any question. Don't worry about hurting my feelings or making me feel bad. However, this is one question I will not take ... please don't ask me how he did it or ask about any details of the suicide itself. I do not want to go there. I know you understand this, and I know you will respect this request. But I promise I will answer any other question." I was advised by mental health experts very early on to draw this line. I never wanted the students to focus on the suicide itself, only on the lessons learned and what they could do to prevent a worst case scenario.

After doing this presentation well over 3000 times at over 1600 schools, there has never been an issue with students being too shy or asking inappropriate questions. Our high school age son Conor is Autistic, so I do know when a question is coming from an Autistic child or a child with special needs that might appear to be "odd" on the surface. I always handle those moments with grace and compassion as any caring adult would in those situations. I find the other students are usually very compassionate and

understanding too towards the student. I often find these become very teachable moments of tolerance and compassion for all of us. Besides, students on the autistic spectrum often ask excellent questions from a unique perspective.

I feel the Q&A portion is the most powerful part of the program because the students get a chance to process the lessons learned and are fully engaged with their questions controlling the flow. However, I always make these four points and I always get asked the right question to make them:

- 1) A very strong suicide prevention message --- “You are loved beyond belief. Don’t ever believe that you don’t matter, that no one would miss you if you were gone.” This is included with the message never to be ashamed to ask for help and don’t ever hesitate to seek help for a friend who has confided in you that they are suicidal.
- 2) Physical Fighting is not the way to solve bullying and that our “Karate Kid” plan was a stupid one.
- 3) I always elaborate on the role of bystanders and send a very clear message to them that they are a big part of the problem, but they could also be a big part of the solution. My message is very pointed towards those bystanders who are friends with people who bully and that they are in the best position to get their friend to stop. They have the most power, the most influence and the least to risk socially. I then give them very practical advice in how to approach their friend.
- 4) I always challenge them to apologize to someone they may have bullied.

There are so many more questions they ask and so many more avenues we go down all good life lessons. For example, how did it affect his sister and brother? Where are the girl and the boy today? If you could see Ryan again, what would you say to him? What advice would you give to someone being bullied? If you had a time machine, how far back would you take it and what would you change?

After the presentation, most students leave wanting to make a difference in their school. Some will apologize to others; some will admit they have been a bystander too many times, and some will ask to see their counselor to talk about their feelings of being bullied or perhaps feeling suicidal. The presentation will end up being a catalyst for change. But it is important for the adults and students to sustain the message through actions and words in the following weeks and months. I provide suggested worksheets and activities to do either right after the presentation or in the following days.

If you have any concerns or questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at johnhalligan@ryansstory.org.