

Ryan's Story Presentation for Students

Total Time Required: 60 Minutes of SEAT TIME.

An administrator or a student leader will usually introduce me using the script I provided. To set the tone appropriately, I start by saying, "You are about to hear a sad story, but my intention is not to make you sad. I intend to get you to think, perhaps differently, about bullying. Before I begin to tell Ryan's story, I want to first introduce Ryan to you."

I then launch a video showing Ryan's short clips and stills throughout his life to a song. My technology needs are a projector, screen, and sound system to plug into my laptop. After the video, I will reappear on stage to tell Ryan's story. My computer will switch to a looped slide show of Ryan's life as I share his story. The overall story is told engagingly and appropriately for grades 5-12.

Included in the story 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 death by suicide is a much more complicated issue. There is no simple cause and effect when it comes to bullying and suicide. I feel that an underlying mental health problem preconditioned Ryan to respond in this extreme way that could have been addressed had he asked an adult for help. 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 who might push them over the edge. In listening to the story, they will also understand how parents and siblings are affected by a family member being bullied and dying by suicide.

The storytelling part of the presentation will take 45 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 also allows them to take a breather from the emotional roller coaster ride they just made 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.

I will first thank them for their respectful behavior and then ask if they know what AOL Instant Messaging (AIM) Ryan used when he was in middle school. Of course, they don't know, so I explain what it was and how the only difference is that they have computers in their pockets with many different apps that allow the same type of behavior. Fundamentally, they can still hide behind a screen and say and do stuff that they would never do to someone in person (even more so now.) They will get a brief history lesson that this was the start of cyberbullying, and the problem has been with us ever since.

I will then take them through these four key takeaways: • A message about forgiveness illustrated in how we dealt with the boy and the girl in Ryan's story. • A powerful suicide prevention message --- "You are loved beyond belief. Don't ever believe that you don't matter and that no one would miss you if you were gone." This point is included with the message never to be ashamed to ask for help and don't hesitate to seek help from a friend who has confided in you that they are suicidal. I will use two critical parts in Ryan's story to illustrate the role of bystanders and send an unambiguous message to them that the bystanders 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 who are in the best position to get their friends to stop. They have the most power, the most influential, and the least to risk socially. I then give them very practical advice on how to approach their friend. I always end with a challenge for them to apologize to someone they may have bullied.

After the presentation, most students leave inspired 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 and perhaps feeling suicidal. The presentation will end up being a catalyst for change. But the adults and students must 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 next few days. I also provide a file to print as a poster with the key takeaways to be hung in the hallways as a reminder.

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