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## MIDDLE SCHOOLERS AFFECTED BY RYAN'S STORY

On a chilly Friday afternoon in January, St. Vincent Martyr School's middle-school students welcomed a special visitor into our community and listened intently to his story ... really his son's story ... Ryan's Story. John Halligan lost his 13 year-old son Ryan to suicide in 2003, following years of torment inflicted by bullies. In response to his grief, John spearheaded legislation in Vermont to hold schools accountable for preventing and responding to bullying. His family launched RyansStory.org not only to share their painful journey with their son, but to also provide resources to combat bullying and raise awareness about teen suicide.

Soon after, schools and media began requesting John to speak about his family's experience.

He has dedicated his life to visiting as many schools as possible to "share Ryan's story and the powerful healing messages of forgiveness and unconditional love." In his talks, John pleads with bystanders to combat bullying and provides advice on how to do so. He hopes his efforts will spare other families this pain.

The presentation began with a video, introducing Ryan to the students through photos of Ryan throughout his life. The students were certainly affected by this touching tribute, all too aware that this smiling baby, child and then young man would not live a long and happy life.

Then John began to speak. You could hear a pin drop as he detailed Ryan's happy beginnings and tragic end. John spoke of the failed strategies his family had employed to combat bullying, his son's pleas not to escalate things with school officials and other parents, and the crushing realization after Ryan's death of how badly his son had been suffering in silence. A cyber trail revealed the details of the months of torment that seemed to be the final straw after years of being targeted by a bully.

John also shared an inspiring tale of the forgiveness he demonstrated to his son's tormentors, who ultimately expressed true remorse. John also expressed how many bystanders came forward to share details that helped him piece Ryan's Story together. He expressed how his family does not blame anyone in particular for his son's suicide, accepting that underlying undiagnosed depression was perhaps a contributing factor. However, John hopes that people will be inspired to act as a community to create an environment that supports adolescents development into happy and healthy adults.

John ended his presentation, opening up it to questions from the students. The middle-schoolers did not disappoint anyone with the kindness and compassion they felt for Ryan, John and those left behind in the wake of this tragedy. One student simply asked to hug John, while another presented him with a small origami butterfly inspired by an anecdote that John had shared. Others had very practical questions about the aftermath, the players involved and actions they should take. John provided strategies and advice, stressing again that his mission is to prevent this from happening to others. He reminded them that it takes only one person to take action and help someone who is suffering.

John thanked the audience for the respect that the students had demonstrated during his presentation. He noted that this was perhaps the best audience to which he had ever delivered his message.

At the presentation's conclusion, Sister Noreen thanked John for sharing his story and led the students in a prayer for John and his family. The students departed the gym in a silence, contemplating the wisdom that John had just imparted to them.