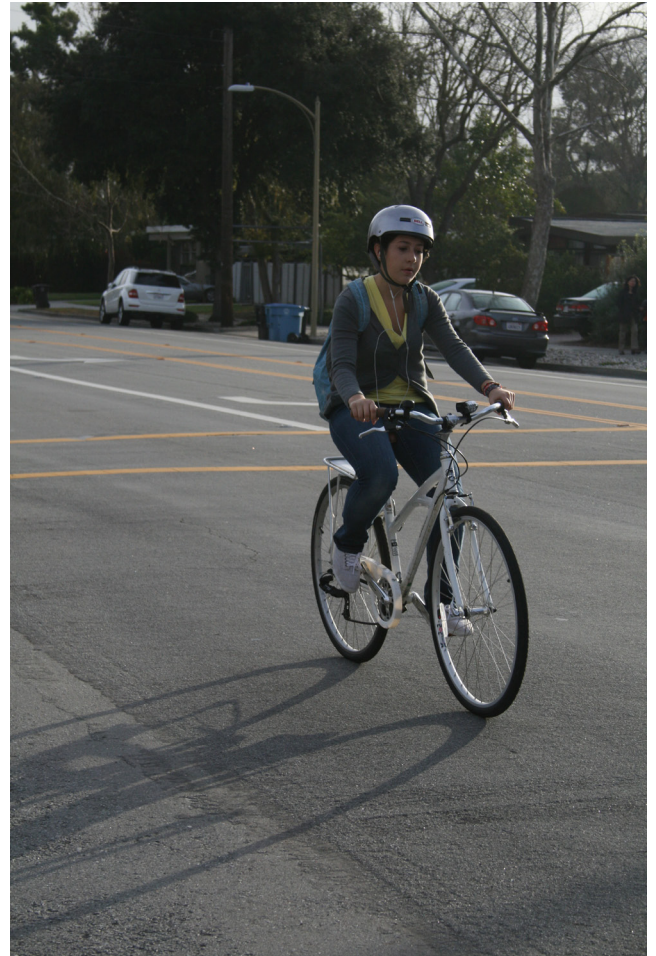




By Alexis Miller

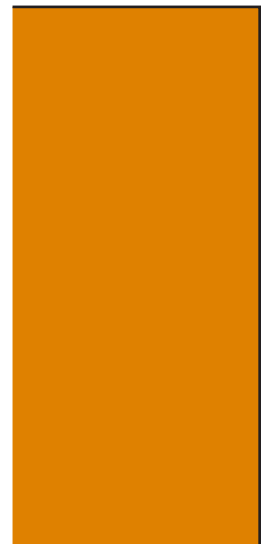




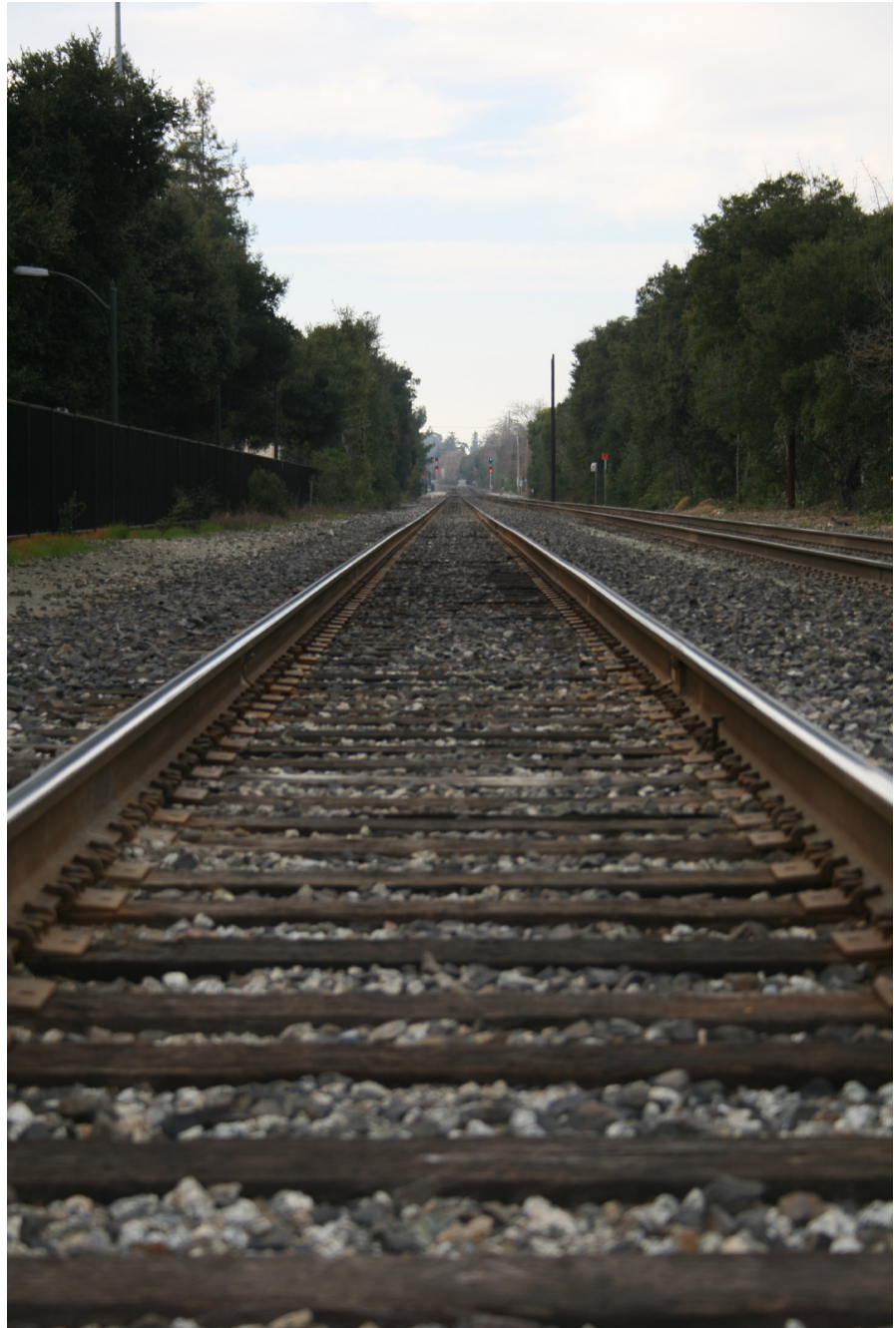


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All the hard work put into making this book wouldn't have been possible without the tremendous support I recieved from friends, and family.

In addition I would like to thank all of my interviewees for taking time out of their day to talk to me. The information they provided has been invaluable to the writing of this book.

Particularily I want to thank Emily Watkins for providing me with the Gunn High School Yearbook from 2008 and 2009, and Rachel Harrus for meeting with me multiple times for interviews.

Also I would like to thank my mom and Mr. and Mrs. Shaefer for providing me with their graduation pictures and old yearbooks.

Last but not least I would like to thank my wonderful teachers at Freestyle Acadamy for their invaluable insight and expertise.



Please Enjoy!



Branches swaying with  
the rain

Blossoms dropping one  
by one

Leaving branches salted  
by tears





# Foreword

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Two years ago when I was a freshman in high school we had a scheduled league water polo game against a school in the town next to us. There was nothing special about this meet: it was in the middle of the water polo season and we, the Los Altos High School girls' water polo team, were undefeated. We started off the week with a few hard practices and then as the week progressed, they started to get easier. Finally on the day before the game my team was in good spirits and we were feeling pretty confident. Unexpectedly though on the day of the game, it was cancelled. Gunn High School, the team we were scheduled to play, canceled the game last minute because an unprecedented event hit the school





Our coach met us as we were all congregated on the sidewalk in front of the bus. Somberly, he led us into our school's hallway and informed us that Gunn had experienced a suicide of one of their students. He then went on to explain that the game was cancelled because the boy who committed suicide had been on the water polo team at Gunn the previous year. This news came as a shock to everyone and it had a sobering effect on all of us. In response, my coach uncharacteristically started counseling us and telling all his players that he was always available to talk and that suicide is never a good option.



My only experience with suicide up to that point in my life had been what I had faced on that day, but it always remained in my mind. That experience inspired me to investigate how a suicide really affects the student body of a school. As I began my research on this topic and conducting interviews, I unintentionally learned a lot about the past suicide victims at Gunn: who their friends were, what sports they did, what school plays they were in, and what issues ultimately probably led them to commit suicide. It wasn't until my first interview of a student at Gunn that something clicked for me. The student I had talked to personally knew the boy on the water polo team who had committed suicide. As she talked about him and how she knew him, in the back of my mind something about him seemed familiar

As my interviewee continued to talk about the boy she knew and how she knew him, it suddenly made sense- I knew the boy who had committed suicide. In elementary school I had swam with him for a couple of years and I always used to see him at the various swim meets in the area through-

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the intention that I would be easy to write a book on the facts about the effects of suicide, but in the process I was sucked into the story and subsequently like the Gunn student body, it has affected me too- even two years after the incident had occurred.









# Introduction

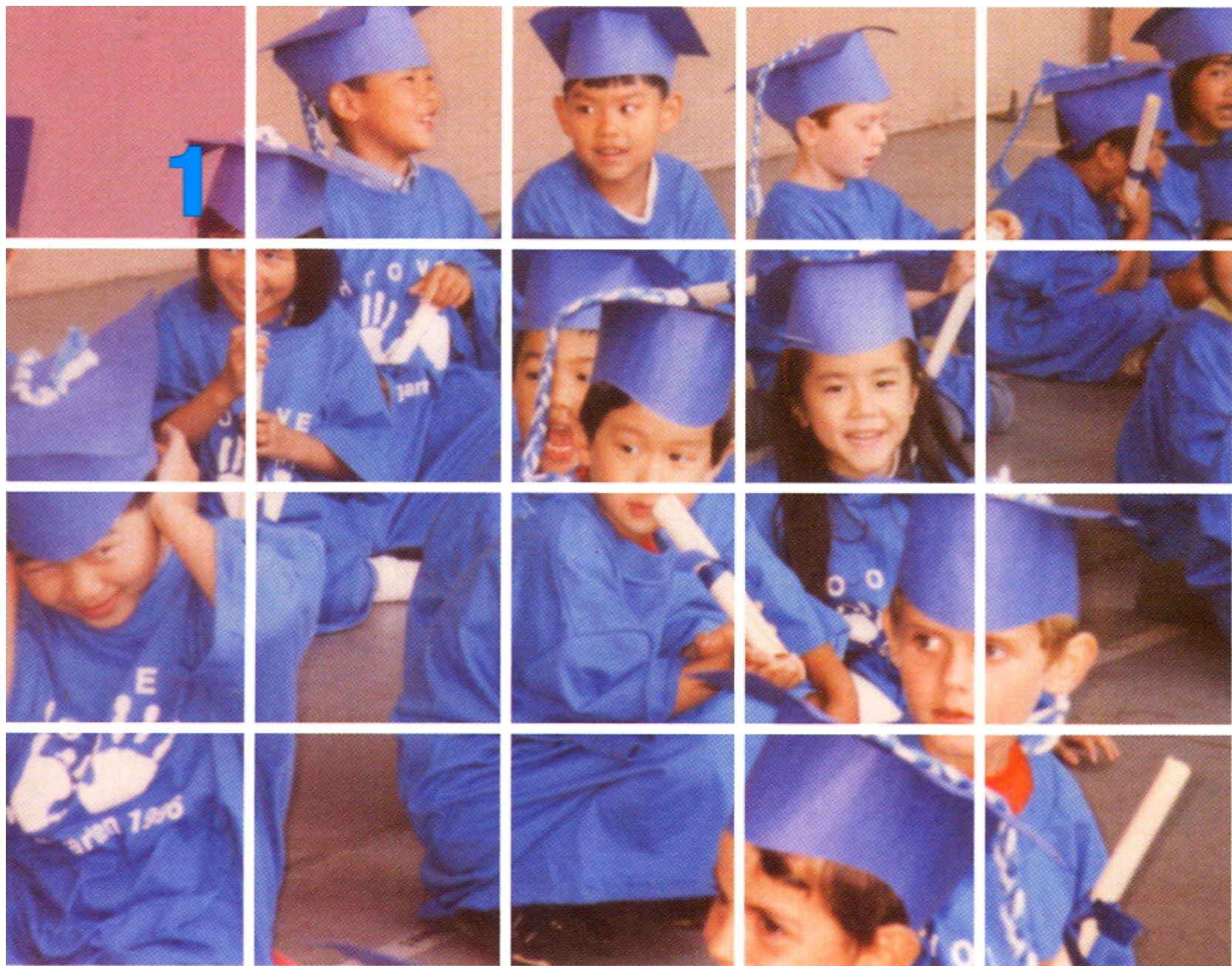
“Tomorrow’s the big day! I can’t wait to finally get my diploma, four years in this place and I’m almost finally out!”

“I know! It’s going to be great.”

As June rolls around, this is the talk that is buzzing between every high school senior in America. Every student looks forward to the day they can finally leave high school behind and move on to bigger and better things. No more SAT prep, no more college applications, and no more endless nights of homework (at least until September).

Graduation has become a monumental experience that has come to exemplify opportunity and choices. To every graduating senior the world is his or her oyster,







opportunities abound and a summer of change is on the horizon. On graduation day each will throw their navy blue cap into the air to the possibilities that await them and to the freedoms they will claim.

Although on June 8, 2011 a different attitude will encompass the Gunn High School graduating class. They will be celebrating like any other senior class but a lingering thought will be in the back of their minds: what if? As they line up in their navy blue robes and assemble on the graduation platform, they will feel the emptiness around them. When the principal announces the graduating class of 2011 and they throw their caps into the air, a thought will block their celebration



of freedom and possibilities. What if he were here? What if she were here? They would be standing next to me, they would be taking smiling pictures with me, they would be joking with me; but they're not here, and they never will be again.

The Gunn High School graduating class of 2011 has experienced five suicides among their student body. Throughout the past ten years, Palo Alto, California has experienced over ten suicides of students in the Palo Alto Unified School District. The majority of these suicides occurred when the students stepped in front of a train that



runs through the middle of Palo Alto. These violent and public deaths of their peers have dramatically altered the lives of the students in Palo Alto.

The experiences we have in high school stay with us forever. We will always remember our favorite teacher, our best friends, the class clown, and our first crush. The same is true for the bad experiences we have: our least favorite teacher, the class bully and the embarrassing moments we've experienced. The Gunn High School graduating seniors will remember the same things but with an added memory: the friends they lost. As they continue throughout their lives, the question of 'what if' will always be in their minds; they will always wonder what their lost friends would be doing if they were still alive.

The students who attend the two Palo Alto high schools, Gunn and Paly, have been forced at a young age to deal with the deaths of their peers. Dealing with these unprecedented losses has strikingly changed the prevailing student body's attitude. At these high schools there is no longer a blissful, innocent temperament, instead students are now constantly on the edge over the implications of these suicides. In this age of social networking the way students mourn is also evolving; new mediums are now



available to let student grieve the loss of a friend in controversial ways. Unpredictably the deaths of these Palo Alto students have forced the students to not only alter their lives but to also address the fine line between support for the student body and the glorification of the suicides. The Palo Alto suicides have created a rift between the student body and the school administration over the best way to handle the effects the suicides have had on the students.







# Chapter One

In late May of 2009 Emily Watkins, a senior at Gunn High School, walked into her first period French class. She immediately knew a suicide had taken place when her teacher started reading off of a half sheet of paper. “Every year it’s the same: ‘the police have decided it’s a suicide, there are services available if you need to talk- remember that we’re all here for you.’ Nobody in my class knew who it was and then when I was walking to English my friend Cody came up to me and asked, ‘do you know who it was?’ ‘No’ I replied, then he said ‘it was Will’” (*Watkins*).

Shock immediately followed and then denial. “‘Well, I don’t

know, I don't think so. He's in my next class- you'll see, he'll be there.' So I went to English and I sat down and Will wasn't there, he sat right next to me and then one of the administrators came into the room and said, 'I think you should know that the person who committed suicide was in your class.' For me it took me a really long time to start crying, our teacher started crying immediately- the whole class didn't do anything that day. The water polo team immediately grouped up, his younger sister was on the water polo team; he was on the water polo team... I didn't go to anymore of my classes... I'm pretty sure I didn't go to class for the rest of the week and then I randomly showed up to a few classes the next week. I went to go stay with Ali [his sister] because for her Will was her best friend... It was really difficult for her- along with the entire family; we were always there for them."

When a suicide occurs, the largest population it affects is the student body of the school the victim went to. The suicide affects every student regardless if he or she knew the victim or not.





According to Ken Plough, a teacher at Gunn High School, on the day of a suicide “all the teachers will be brought in at 7:30 [and] we’ll go to a meeting with the principle and she’ll explain what’s going on, then before we even start our school day we’ll have the CHAC and KARA counselors already here on site.” Reported by Emily, teachers will usually cancel tests or move them to another day. In addition, the principle of Gunn, Noreen Likins, will send out an email to the Palo Alto community recognizing the suicide, “Please reassure your student that their health and welfare is much more important than anything else right now. We stand ready to help and support you in any way we can in the difficult task of helping students navigate these teen years” (Palo Alto Weekly Staff).



Within the week the student body will try to boost student moral. Students began to paste a blizzard of paper scraps with messages of affirmation around campus. one Post-it note said. ‘Just keep swimming,’ another said. ‘There is always someone who will listen,’ was written on another. And, ‘There’s no meaning to happiness w/o sadness. Take it easy’” (La Ganga). In addition, the students will “usually have some sort of poster where we can write something to the person who has committed suicide. It’s sort of nice to have closure” (Watkins).

While counseling services and student body activities are meant to help ease the pain and confusion students feel, the suicides still have a deep emotional impact on the students. According to Emily, “for the first one [the suicide] everyone was mourning together, everyone was willing to talk about it, everyone was there for each

“At first the students were in shock, then after the fourth one... the feeling was ‘who’s next?’”







other.” The sadness of the loss then turned to shock and “then after the fourth one... the feeling was ‘who’s next?’” To the students at Gunn, “It’s scary how much suicides have become normal here; it’s almost at a point where it’s expected. I mean I hope the last one is the last one but I wouldn’t be surprised if there was another one.” For Gunn students there is a constant fear “that someone I know who seems sad will take the quick route out.” In fact this constant fear has inspired friends to seek help for other friends who aren’t getting it. In Emily’s experience, “one of my friends from a few years ago Facebook messaged me a few months ago and said ‘someone reported me to the office, did you do that?’...I’ve found out a lot of my friends attempted [suicide] or have depression through [these] events.”

Students at Gunn are not only looking out for their peers in light of past events but they are also more conscientious of their actions. Every high school kid can recall a time when they’ve said things like “kill me now, I have such a hard test tomorrow” or “my life is over.” For students at Gunn they make a conscious effort not to say things like that. For Emily “I remember that Will was easy to offend but it was in a joking way... I felt like I was a good enough friend to do it without harming him but I

think this has made me more careful about my words. I don't want to be that last thing that sends someone over the edge." For another Gunn student, he's noticed that people at school have been a lot nicer since the suicides started and that people are more receptive to listening to their peer's issues. Another student shared that because of the suicides they've made a stronger point to be social and to participate in school events. Overall, the cluster of suicides has made a behavioral change on the Gunn community.

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**TRAFFIC JAM:** Students try to squeeze into the turf fields at lunch on the first day of Homecoming 2008 to get to the Tug of War battle between the four classes.

whole the sui-Palo Alto Unified trict have had a fecton the student At Gunn High with student or-and counseling students have affected by the overarching atti-

tude at the high school has morphed into an aura of a "who's next?" mentality. While this constant feeling envelopes the student body there has been positives that have resulted- students are now more attentive to what they say and the suicides have brought the students together.



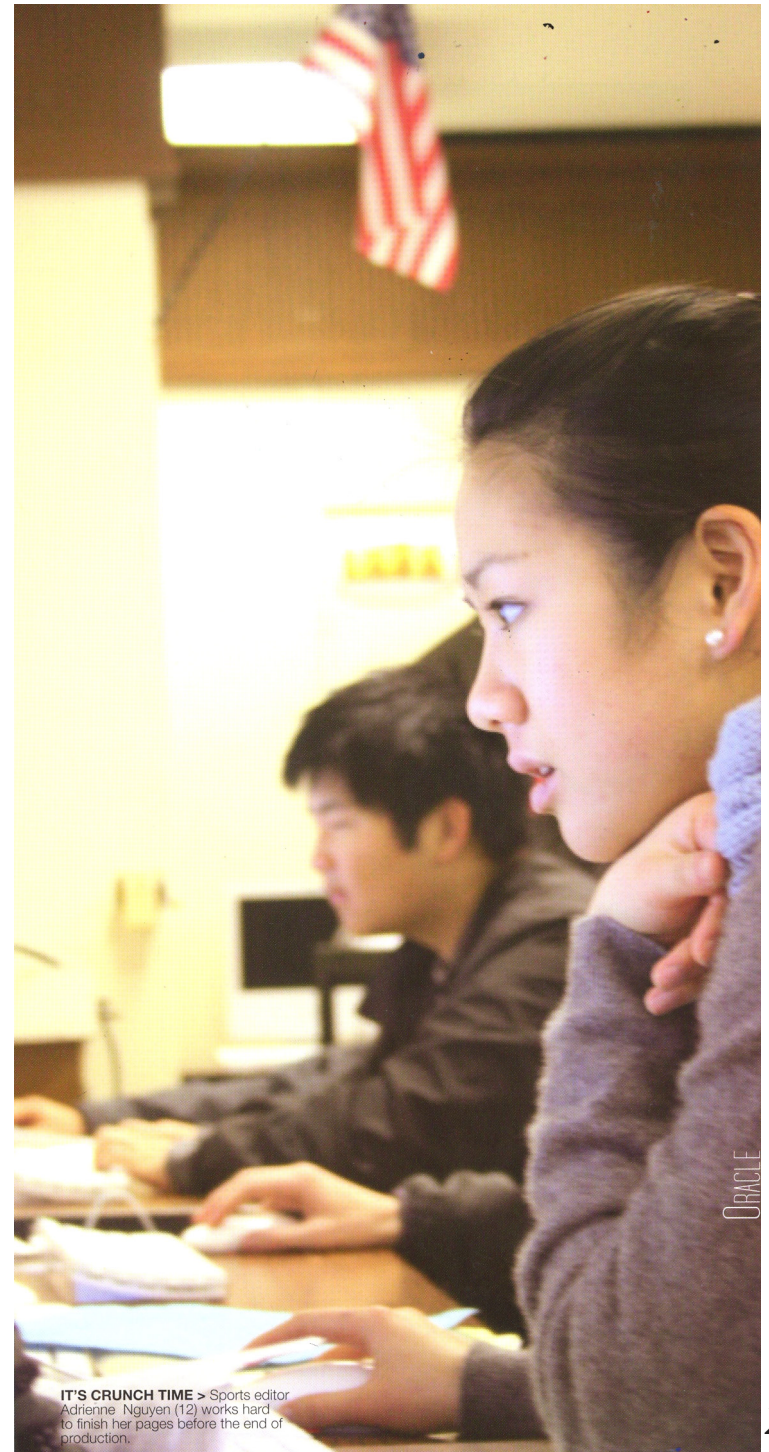




# Chapter Two

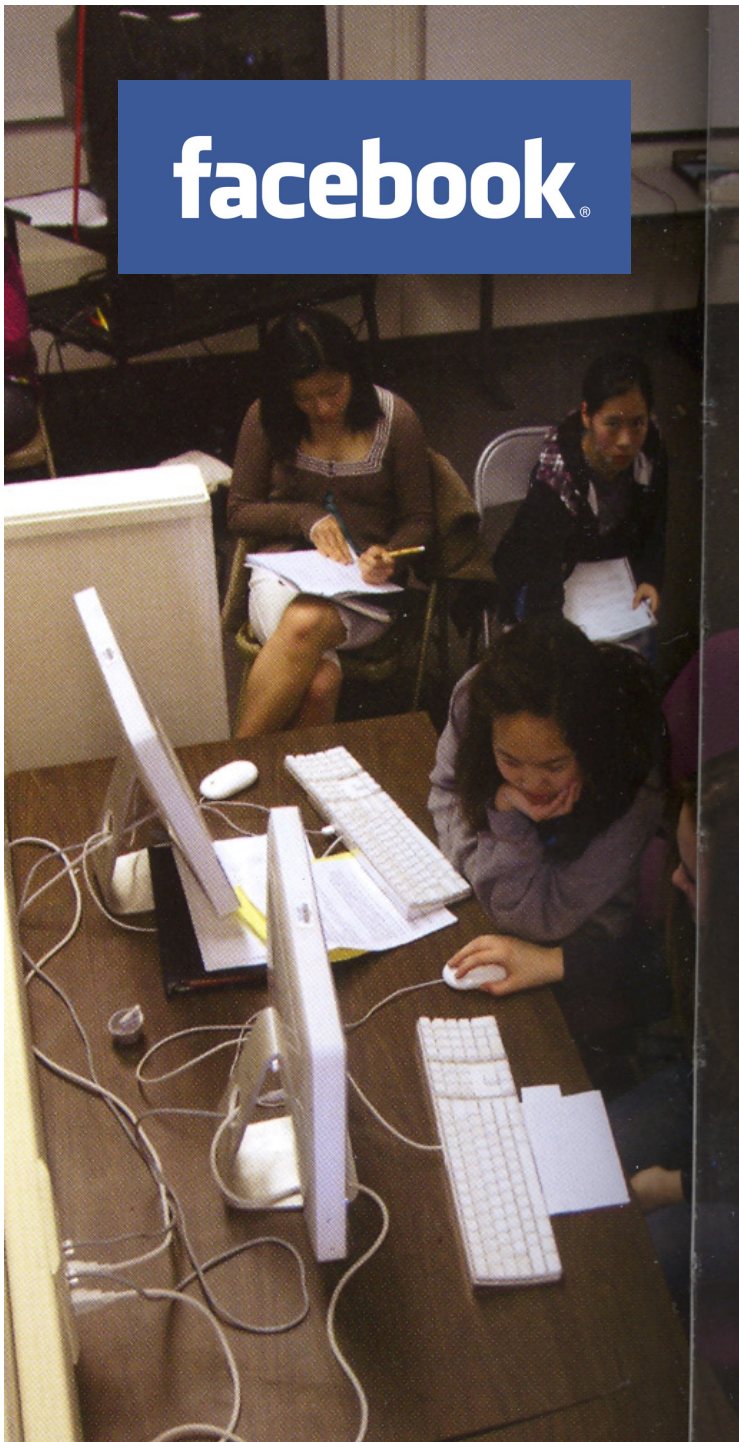
After coming home from school one day in early 2011, Rachel Harrus, a senior at Palo Alto High School, logged onto her Facebook page. Instantly she was bombarded with hundreds of posts by her friends saying “RIP,” “You’re a legend,” and “We’ll miss you.” At first these posts shocked her until she realized that these posts were telling the world that another suicide had taken place. “I think the way people mourn is evolving... I think Facebook is most responsible for spreading the word. I just saw it as wildfire; everyone’s statuses were about the suicide.... People who would have never brought it up [in real life] were posting [their thoughts] on Facebook” (*Harrus*).

In an increasingly digital age, people are communicating more and more



**IT'S CRUNCH TIME** > Sports editor Adrienne Nguyen (12) works hard to finish her pages before the end of production.



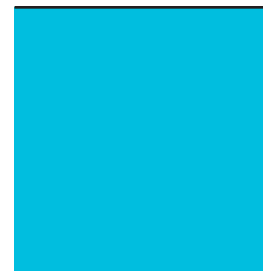


through cyber space. Social networking sites, such as Facebook, are becoming the biggest place to voice opinions, interests, talk to friends, and simultaneously the new place to grieve. Facebook, the predominate social networking site for high school students in Palo Alto, has become the new place to grieve because other traditional public sectors are being blocked. School administrators are now pushing the mourning process away from school campuses for fear of glorifying the act of suicide. Some agree with the decision while others do not; regardless, the new public place to mourn is through the Internet. The question then becomes is Facebook really the best place to grieve?

The numerous suicides the Palo Alto Unified School District has faced have led school administrators to believe that public mourning at the schools is too dangerous because it glorifies suicide. According to Emily Watkins after the first suicide, “everyone was there for each other and everyone was able to express their opinion. For

the second [suicide] there was still some mourning, but the school wanted it to be not as obvious. For Will the school decided that now it was a suicide cluster and so they decided that they weren't going to talk about it and pretend it didn't happen, which is what we've continued to do throughout the other suicides." According to Ken Plough, a teacher at Gunn, "after we went through a series of [the suicides] we [decided] that we would acknowledge that it happened, but we didn't want to support it or put this person on a pedestal so that they [the students] see it's not a way to gain glory." After the first suicide, "there were flowers in front of doors, there were the sayings all over campus, no matter where you went on campus there was some remembrance of the student, and they [the administration] saw that as a backlash."

There are those that agree with the Palo Alto Unified School District's decision to stop on campus demonstrations because they believe that they cross the line into glorification. According to the Los Angeles Times, "Psychiatrists, suicidologists and experts in child development warn that the worst response to teen suicide is to make it



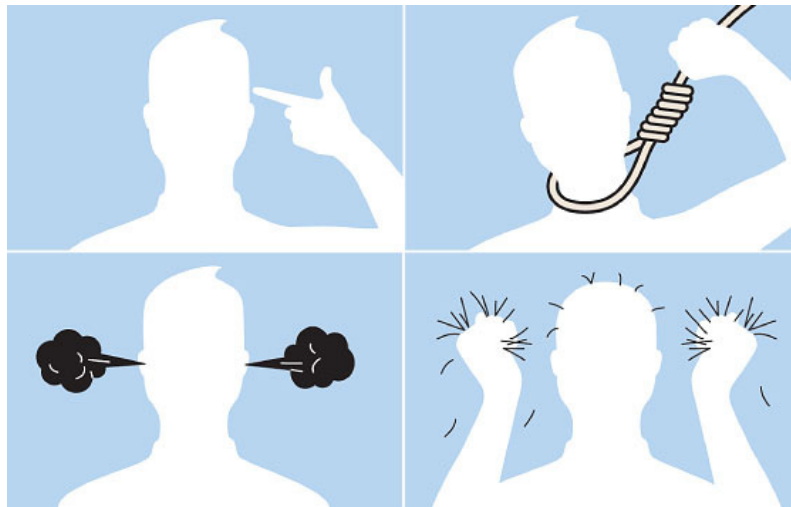


“It’s really scary for kids who are more of onlookers and introverts possibly, who might have a bad reaction to reading the posts. [The postings] might not leave their mind, ‘what about that person, they committed suicide but all these people commented and everyone loved them even when they are gone’ - they’re seeing all these comments and that’s why it’s scary because no one knows who feels ‘that way’ inside.”

seem glamorous or normal. They caution against shrines” (*La Ganga*). The Palo Alto Unified School District thinks that talking a lot about the suicides is bad a well. According to Kevin Skelly, the superintendent of the school district, “A lot of conversations about it have the potential to do more harm than good. We’re trying to make it business as usual because we think that’s what kids need most” (*Bulwa*).

While a good majority agree with withholding public mourning on school campuses, other do not. According to Carol Harrus, a local psychologist and psychiatrist, “Some parents feel that by memorializing it, it kind of creates an idealization about

the person and some particular vulnerability who are left to deal so sure that’s true. idea. I think in contrast, some parents very important to believe that it is not just memorialize, but to be able to talk to their children and to the community as well.”



feel that creates a bility in the children with this. I am not That represents one trast, some parents very important to ize, but to be able to and to the commu-

The majority of the students in the Palo Alto Unified School District share the opinion of Carol Harrus; they want to be able to mourn and talk about what is going on. In Emily’s opinion, “I really don’t like [the suppression] because people need to talk about it. At some point someone is going to want to talk about it, even if they don’t want to talk about it right away”. According to Rachel Harrus, “Kids want to be able to... honor their friend and the person who was in their lives; it makes kids hostile towards the administration and I’m upset about it too.”



As the students in the Palo Alto area become more frustrated, they turn to mediums that aren't controlled to release their emotion. Facebook has become the newest place to release grief and frustration because it is uncontrolled and it allows everyone to have a voice. According to Rachel "Facebook is actually really important because when kids want to mourn it's probably bad that they hold it in and can't talk about it anywhere. I think a lot of kids whether or not this is a true reality or not feel that they can't go to school and talk to people at school because of how it was handled at Gunn-kids weren't allowed to put up memorials, kids weren't allowed to put up flowers." For students, like Emily Watkins, Facebook was a way to acknowledge the event had happened, especially when it wasn't acknowledged at school. To her, posting messages like "RIP" on Facebook was out of respect.

Most people agree that there must be an outlet for students to release their

emotion and express their grief. Similarly, a lot of people see Facebook as a good way to immediately release emotion. To Ken Plough, Facebook is a good place "where if they want to express themselves they could go ahead and do it." According to Dr. Sara Corse, "What the Internet does for people is it allows, at any time or place that suits the person's emotional schedule, access to information and other people's feelings about something. It's a way people can move out of social isolation" (*Brondou*). Although Facebook is condoned as a good place for short-term relief, many people are afraid of its long-term affects on those troubled kids who see the posts. According to Rachel what really shocked her about the Facebook postings was what it implied. "It's really scary for kids who are more of onlookers and introverts possibly, who might have a bad reaction to reading the posts. [The postings] might not leave their mind, 'what about that person, they committed

suicide but all these people commented and everyone loved them even when they are gone' - they're seeing all these comments and that's why it's scary because no one knows who feels 'that way' inside." What was even scarier about the postings was what she felt after reading them. "I definitely noticed that I would like to be remembered that way if I died. It was scary to me because I don't have suicidal thoughts and I interpreted these com-  
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real world to do so in cyber space. Although Facebook does have its drawbacks, with posts such as "we will always remember you" it does cross the line into glorification. This memorializing effect is exactly what concerns administrators the most for fear that copycats will ensue. Subsequently Facebook is both a useful but also a potentially dangerous tool.



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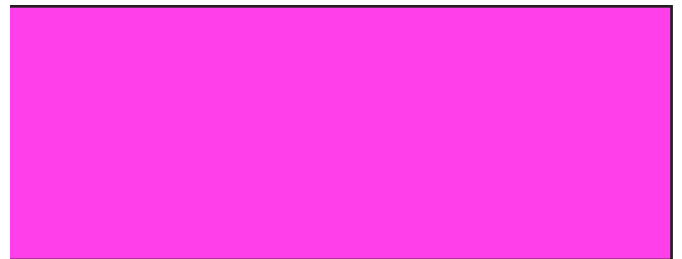
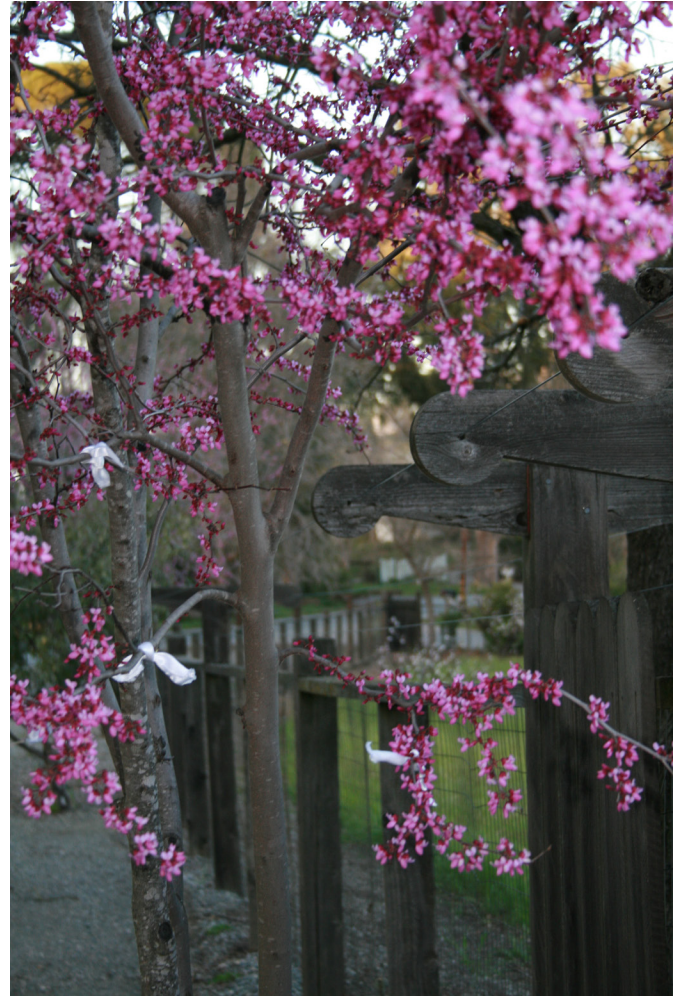




# Conclusison

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The series of tragic suicides that have hit the Palo Alto community have ultimately had a profound effect on the students of Gunn and Paly. Experiencing the death of a peer has forced adulthood on the student body faster than it should have been, and the innocence of high school has been swept away by the drama surrounding post suicide ordeals. The raging debate over support for the students vs. unnecessary glorification has altered student body attitudes and has forced students to seek places to mourn without administration interference. Therefore, while these awful events have robbed students of their last years of childhood, it has also taught them the importance of individual expression.







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