

## "MEAN GIRLS": THE RECLASSIFICATION OF CHILDREN'S AND ADOLESCENTS' FOLKLORE

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In the winter of 2001, Ashley, a fifteen-year-old ninth-grader in a Catholic girls' school in Nashville, Tennessee, starts to have trouble with her classmates. "You're BARBIE," her friend Marcia tells her. "I hate your blonde hair and your clothes." Marcia and two other girls send threatening e-mails to Ashley; between classes they stand near Ashley's locker, muttering, "Barbie, Barbie!" in singsong voices. Following her mother's advice to ignore these mean girls, Ashley deletes their e-mails and turns away when they speak to her. Then all the name signs around Ashley's locker, colorful posters made by her closest friends, disappear overnight. "It's as if she's lost all her spirit," Ashley's mother tells me on the phone. "The name-signs were the last straw. She doesn't smile any more. We're thinking of moving her to a different school."

Insisting on staying at her familiar high school, Ashley tries to ignore Marcia and her friends. Her parents have a talk with the assistant principal, but their talk has little impact. Marcia and her friends stop targeting Ashley's locker, but their e-mails intensify. When Ashley changes her e-mail address, Marcia and her friends figure out her new address and start using it. They look for new ways to get Ashley's attention. Their harassment is long-term, unyielding.

During that same winter, Ashley's fourteen-year-old cousin Nathan is also having trouble with classmates: eighth-grade boys in a public middle school in a small town in upstate New York. Noticing Nathan's nervous habit of pulling his hair, his friend Eric has started chanting "Puller! Puller! Puller!" Eric and several other boys get into the habit of chanting "Puller!" on the bus ride home every afternoon; Nathan says nothing in response. Between classes, when no teachers are around, the boys throw paper at Nathan; occasionally Eric tries to push Nathan into his locker.

Nathan's parents have a talk with the assistant principal, who says that if the situation worsens, a video camera on the school bus can be used to gather evidence. When Nathan tells Eric to stop bothering him, Eric laughs and chants some more. Finally, Nathan finds Eric after school, just outside the school grounds where fighting is prohibited. He grabs Eric by the collar and punches him, hard. Other kids

cheer. Eric's nose is broken; he has to miss a half-day of school to go to the doctor. Nathan's problems with bullying are over.

These two stories from my own circle of family and friends illustrate gender differences in bullying, a phenomenon that has recently received much media attention. A special issue of *Children's Folklore Review* in 2002 examined aftereffects of the Columbine school shooting. Since that tragedy and others, adults have learned that bullying can lead to catastrophe. Once hidden in the childhood underground, bullying is now national news.

Definitions of bullying have evolved over time. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word "bully" as "a blustering 'gallant'" or "a tyrannical coward who makes himself a terror to the weak"; this definition, with literary examples dating back to 1688, is more recent than "a term of endearment and familiarity," which goes back to 1538. According to an article in the *Gale Encyclopedia of Childhood and Adolescence*, recapitulated on a popular website, bullying "usually involves an older or larger child (or several children) victimizing a single child who is incapable of defending himself or herself" (<http://www.fairiebelievers.com/gnomenews/2002/bullying.htm>).

Since the early 1990s, people have tended to view bullying as repetitive verbal and physical harassment; the act of bullying has become more significant than the age or size of the bullies, which varies widely. Because of the broad age-range of bullying, from first grade through high school, it is necessary to view bullying as a process that begins in childhood and mutates into new forms in adolescence. Name calling, injurious pranks, rituals of exclusion, and physical pummeling are among the behaviors of bullying that can be found in the annals of children's and adolescents' folklore.

How can the study of folklore help us to understand bullying? The media have given more attention to boys' bullying than girls': a natural choice, since the perpetrators of the Columbine massacre and other school shootings were boys. Since the winter of 2002, some media attention has shifted to the bullying patterns of girls. In this essay I want to examine bullying by girls and, to some extent, bullying by boys, using information from children's folklore studies, the popular press, and a discussion group for parents and educators. I also want to explore how parts of children's and adolescents' folklore have been reclassified: instead of being viewed as traditions belonging to young people, they have become known as negative behaviors prohibited by school regulations and public policy. This reclassification has major implications for those of us who teach folklore and work with children and adolescents in the public sector.

## FOLKLORE STUDIES

Before 1999, when the Columbine school shootout occurred, folklorists did not devote much attention to children's derisive language and behavior; narratives, play, and games were more common focal points for scholarly studies. As Marilyn Jorgensen points out in her chapter on teases and pranks in *Children's Folklore: A Sourcebook*, folklorists have published sample texts, but "interest in the genre seems to have stopped short of an in-depth analysis of the many possible meanings and functions of taunts" (1995: 224).

In *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (1959), Iona and Peter Opie devote an entire chapter to "Unpopular Children: Jeers and Torments." They distinguish between taunts of a general nature, from which recipients can "take little harm," and jeers for particular offenses, which are characterized by "piercing exactitude" (175). The first example of a specific jeer comes from a group of girls expressing their derision toward a girl who seems unfriendly:

I know a little girl sly and deceitful,  
 Every little tittle-tat she goes and tells the people.  
 Long nose, ugly face, ought to be put in a glass case.  
 If you want to know her name, her name is *Heather Lee*.  
 Please, *Heather Lee*, keep away from me;  
 I don't want to speak to you, nor you to speak to me.  
 Once we were friends, now we disagree,  
 Oh, *Heather Lee*, keep away from me.  
 It's not because you're dirty,  
 It's not because you're clean,  
 It's because you've got the whooping-cough,  
 Pooh! You awful thing! (175).

This rhyme, sometimes used for skipping, describes both offense and punishment. Because Heather Lee is a sly, deceitful, and unattractive tattletale, the other girls will refuse to speak to her. As the Opies explain, excluding a child from normal social interaction is often called "Sending to Coventry." A ten-year-old girl says:

"When someone does something most of the class disagrees with, we send that person to Coventry which means we never speak to them. Sometimes one or two people hold their noses with their fingers and say that the place smells where they have been. Another name for this is "giving them a cold shoulder" (199).

Sending a classmate to Coventry can be traced back to British school stories as early as 1795; its apparent origin is the Parliamentary practice of sending Royalist prisoners to Coventry to keep them safe. The Opies make it clear that girls send each other to Coventry much more often than boys do. Boys bump or dump an unpopular fellow on the ground; they pull his arms and legs, make him march backward through mud and bushes, and jump roughly upon him, yelling "Pile on" (199201). Bullies are frequently subjected to these kinds of physical torture, as bullying tends to "arouse the desire for physical retribution more strongly than any other offender of the juvenile code" (192). From the wealth of examples in the Opies' collection, readers can see that juvenile justice is a self-regulating system. Both boys and girls call each other names, but the girls' jeers are especially varied and colorful. For example, girls may call a classmate who seems conceited a "swankpot," "Swanky Liz," "Swanky Lanky Liz," or "Swanky Pants" (182).

Echoing the Opies, Mary and Herbert Knapp state in *One Potato, Two Potato* (1976) that "the cruelest epithets are those which are the most specific" (66). Their list of cruel jeers includes "Pipe-neck, Platypus, Fish-lips, Beaver-teeth, Mush-mouth, Bubble-head, Spider-legs, Candy-grabber, Buger-peeler" (66). Focussing on the efficacy of children's self-education, the Knapps explain that jeers "enable children partly to control situations that would otherwise be almost unbearably frustrating" (59). Although they refrain from saying that verbal duels are always beneficial, they are firm in saying that "the traditional ways children have devised for dealing with feelings are better than most of us realize" (68).

Although most of the Knapps' coverage of children's jeers is not gender-specific, their description of Slam Books shows that girls are in charge: "Girls 'keep' these books, but boys and girls alike write in them" (79). Comments about an unpopular child in a 1969 Slam Book include "'Scago la Vomit,' 'Stupid' (three times), 'Gross' (twice), 'Ugh!' (three times), 'Not nice,' 'Show off,' 'Stinks,' 'Dumb Dope,' 'Scab,' 'Pu Pu,' 'Ugh boo'"(79). Analysis of these hurtful comments takes a generally positive direction:

This is scapegoating, and it is appalling. But Slam Books have redeeming features. Children who write in them discover that writing is good for something besides homework, and they learn a lot about the perils and pleasures of judging other people. They need to be surprised when they are misinterpreted, to be shocked as they discover what others think of

them, and to find out all those complicated things one learns from quarrels and reconciliations, from secret agreements, treaties, and alliances (79-80).

The underlying assumption here is that children, when left to their own devices, teach themselves good things that will prepare them for adult social interaction. This credo can be traced back to Rousseau's *Emile*, first published in 1762, in which the child becomes an independent, self-directed learner who makes healthful choices.

In *American Children's Folklore* (1988), Simon Bronner lists a number of derisive rhymes, including this one from an eight-year-old girl:

Mary, Mary, is no good  
 Chop her up for firewood  
 If the fire does not burn  
 Throw her in a butter churn  
 If the butter turns to cheese  
 Georgie, Georgie will give her a squeeze (75).

Bronner explains that jeers clarify children's norms, such as cleanliness and cooperation; they also initiate social drama and elicit information or an emotional reaction from the child who is teased (74). This approach explores what a child can learn from derisive folklore without trying to identify all functions as educational and productive.

An early study of adolescent folklore, Millicent R. Ayoub and Stephen A. Barnett's "Ritualized Verbal Assault in White High School Culture," discusses the popularity of Sounding, also known as Playing the Dozens, among white high school students in the mid-1960s. Citing Roger Abrahams' *Deep Down in the Jungle*, Ayoub and Barnett suggest that Playing the Dozens spread from African-American culture to white culture after World War II. Offering examples of typical Mother-Sounds ("Your old lady is a fag," "Your old lady gives Green Stamps"), Ayoub and Barnett make several points that are significant for folklorists studying verbal duels and taunts today. Sounds begin in elementary school and gradually become more sophisticated as children grow older (339). What looks to outsiders like a serious exchange of verbal abuse can seem harmless to in-group members, who insist that "It's all in fun" (340). Girls play a name game related to the Dozens but deny that they know about the Dozens itself, even though they seem familiar with it. Ayoub's and Barnett's study conveys the same general message as the Opies' and Knapps': young people's folklore regulates itself.

In his recent essay "Redwood Grove: Youth Culture in a Group Home," published in *Children's Folklore Review* (2002), Jesse Gelwicks describes how children use storytelling and teasing to form a social hierarchy outside the control of adults. According to Gelwicks, "Adults can intervene and impose control based on behavior charts and points, but the social hierarchy framed by the boys is also a very powerful force in shaping the children's experiences" (77). This affirmation of children's hierarchies is an important reminder of what children can accomplish on their own, even in an era when youth culture seems to be fraught with danger.

## RECLASSIFICATION

Since April 20, 1999, when the Columbine school shootout occurred, the view that children and adolescents can regulate their own society has radically changed. Knowing that children with guns can exact retribution for verbal derision makes the derision itself seem much more dangerous. High schools, middle schools, and even elementary schools have tightened their regulations; parents have become more watchful, and the power of words in youth culture has gained new respect.

Before Columbine, however, a change in attitude was already emerging. In 1991, a teenager in Duluth, Minnesota discovered that her name was listed among "sexually degrading graffiti" on the boys' bathroom wall. After the school refused to erase the graffiti, the girl's parents filed charges with the Minnesota Department of Human Rights, and a cash settlement of \$15,000 was awarded "for emotional damages as a result of sexual harassment" (Strauss). Graffiti, often considered verbal and pictorial art by folklorists, had become grounds for a lawsuit.

In 1993, Susan Strauss published an essay in the *Vocational Education Journal* that gave examples of sexual harassment. Among these were graffiti, Slam Books, pranks such as "spiking" or "de-pantsing" and "wedgies," and "name calling: from 'honey' to 'bitch' or worse." More than half of the offenses listed in Strauss's essay came from children's and adolescents' folklore. What used to be part of the culture of childhood, occasionally noticed by parents and teachers, had entered the language of legal prohibition (<http://www.straussconsult.com/article2.htm>).

A survey of middle school and high school handbook available on the Internet shows how school administrators have tried to outlaw behavior that might prove to be dangerous. Rule 8 at New Lebanon Middle School in Ohio specifies that there should be no language

"deemed inappropriate or obscene by any staff member, either written or verbal, to annoy or humiliate others or to disrupt the educational process" (<http://www.newlebanon.K12.oh.us/handbook> ). At St. David's School in Miami, with students from preschool to eighth grade, regulations prohibit rudeness, roughness, and "vile, vulgar or indecent language." One rule specifies that "Slam Books (derogatory writings) will not be tolerated. Students participating in Slam Books will be disciplined accordingly" (<http://www.saintdavid.org/School Forms/Handbook>).

In Hartford, Connecticut, high schools and middle schools have adopted a "zero tolerance" approach to fighting and dangerous pranks. The mother of a boy who was in sixth grade in the Hartford area told me:

Michael put plant food in the teachers' coffee pot after his teacher told the class about kids substituting salt for sugar. The police came; they told him that if a teacher had been pregnant, she would have lost her baby after drinking the plant food. Before this prank, Michael was a wonderful kid. Afterwards, he was on the middle school's "Most Wanted" list. He was suspended. I always thought it was the teacher's fault, because he told the class about that substitution prank (Martin).

The boundary line between pranks and crimes has changed, and educators' roles have been called into question. Could a parent file a complaint against a high-school teacher because a traditional prank was mentioned in class? As the above story suggests, describing a prank could precipitate a grievance.

The state of Connecticut is currently holding legislative hearings on Public Act Number 02-119: "An Act Concerning Bullying Behavior in Schools and Concerning The Pledge of Allegiance." Defining bullying as "repeated, overt acts by one or more students on school grounds or at a school-sponsored activity that are intended to ridicule humiliate, or intimidate another student," this bill requires all school boards to develop an anti-bullying policy. Connecticut's Commission on Children has announced that Erika Harold, Miss America 2003, will work with Connecticut students to help launch an anti bullying platform (<http://www.cga.state.ct.us/coc>). Colorado and other states have already developed laws against bullying; Connecticut's recent efforts should have an impact on the way bullying is received in the northeastern United States.

**"MEAN GIRLS"**

On February 24, 2002, the bright pink cover of the *New York Times Magazine* displayed a doll-like teenaged girl, punctured with blackheaded pins, held in the fist of another girl who was clearly her tormentor. The headline: "Mean Girls and the new movement to tame them." This essay by Margaret Talbot immediately drew nationwide attention. Teachers, parents, and Internet chat groups mobilized to answer Talbot's questions: is it possible that girls are more aggressive than boys? And if so, how can their damage be controlled?

Talbot's essay gives the reader a glimpse into the "Girl World" of Rosalind Wiseman, a thirty-two-year-old woman who presents programs and seminars on relational aggression, date rape, and other issues that worry parents and teachers of girls. The founder of a nonprofit organization known as the Empower Program, Wiseman works with groups of girls to help them take responsibility for their actions and develop, as her handbook explains, "strategies to interrupt the cycle of gossip, exclusivity and reputations" (40). Talbot's description of Rosalind Wiseman makes her sound like an infiltrator who has studied girls' gestures and folk speech:

When Wiseman catches sight of you approaching, she knows how to do a little side-to-side wave, with her elbow pressed to her hip, that is disarmingly girlish. She says "totally" and "omigod" and "don't stress" and "chill" a lot and refers to people who are "hotties" or "have it goin on" (40).

In fact, Wiseman has studied girls' customs and chooses her wardrobe with the help of a seventeen-year-old girl: her sister Zoe. She interacts with her girl clients much as an older sister would, but she is an entrepreneur hired to intervene. Other programs like hers include the Ophelia Project in Erie, Pennsylvania and GENaustin in Austin, Texas. Helping girls to avoid hurting each other has become big business.

Does the prevalence of these relatively new programs show that girls are tormenting each other in new and alarming ways? On the contrary: the examples Talbot offers reveal patterns from children's and adolescents' folklore. When Wiseman holds an Apologies Day, girls who have been mean to each other are told to write down feelings of contrition. The girls who resist this exercise most are the ones Wiseman calls Alpha Girls, R.M.G. 's (Really Mean Girls) or Queen Bees; their victims are Wannabes and Messengers. Interestingly, the written apologies often hold new insults for the original victims. One girl writes, "I'm sorry I told everyone you had an American Girl doll. It

really burned your reputation" (26). Another girl writes a longer note:

Dear 'Friend,' I'm sorry that I talked about you behind your back. I once even compared your forehead/face to a minefield (only 2 1 person though). I'm really sorry I said these things even though I might still believe them (26).

Devious though these apologies may be, they sound familiar. Unflattering, insulting analogies have been common for as long as children's folklore has been recorded. The apologies written by girls in Wiseman's group are like Slam Book entries; the writer is allowed to record comments that will make the recipient furious.

Another genre of "meanness" common among Wiseman's girls is the custom of three-way calling. Two girls call up a third girl, but one of the two does not reveal that she's on the line. The girl who is speaking encourages the third girl to say terrible things about her silent partner. This is a phone prank resembling the traditional girls' game Truth or Dare, in which a player must share shocking truths. With the technology of three-way calling, the potential for inflicting pain is more advanced than it would be otherwise.

One especially painful process is the ritual of exclusion. The custom of Sending to Coventry, noted by the Opies, is just one of many for the same purpose. An apology note written by one of Wiseman's clients gives a few details: "Dear B. I'm sorry for excluding you and ignoring you. Also, I have said a bunch of bad things about you. I have also run away from you just because I didn't like you" (26). One reason for exclusion is failure to follow a clique's dress rules, such as "You cannot wear jeans any day but Friday, and you cannot wear a ponytail or sneakers more than once a week"(28). Rigid self-generated dress codes are typical of adolescents. While folklorists, psychologists, and sociologists have attempted to figure out why such rituals are so common, more research seems to be necessary.

Rosalind Wiseman's book *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends and Other Realities of Adolescence* was published in the spring of 2002. Two other books on the same subject came out at that time: Emily White's *Fast Girls: Teenage Tribes and the Myth of the Slut* and Rachel Simmons' *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*. The era of "Mean Girl" analysis has arrived.

This publishing trend was preceded, perhaps inspired, by several books by Scandinavian scholars. Dan Olweus's *Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do* (1993) compares boys' and girls' bullying; it also compares bullying in Sweden with bullying in Nor-

way. Other variables studied by Olweus include class size, school size, physical weakness and strength, and supervision at recess and lunch time. A book that more specifically addresses girls' aggression is Kaj Bjorkqvist's *Of Mice and Women: Aspects of Female Aggression* (1992). With an interdisciplinary approach, Bjorkqvist asks whether females of all species are less aggressive than males. His focus on patterns of female aggression has opened up the subject for scholars in other fields. Another valuable resource is *The Nature of School Bullying: A Cross-Cultural National Perspective* (1999), edited by Olweus and others.

## GLOBAL VILLAGE

While looking for information about girls' bullying on the Internet, I discovered an informative website: <http://www.bullying.org>. Designed by a Canadian teacher to help children and their parents and teachers, this website contains pictures, poems, and stories from children who have suffered from bullying in countries around the world. Many of the poems, including this one by eleven-year-old Dani, show the torment of bullying:

When will it stop?  
 I hope one day it does.  
 I want, I need a life.  
 MY LIFE. The one I had before you set onto me.  
 Before I walked down that hall in fear.  
 Before I saw that note you gave to all of them.  
 Before I was told I was nothing. Before I was spat on.  
 Some day I'll be free and I will walk far away from you, so far you'll never find me.

According to the proverb that Hillary Clinton used as a book title, "It takes a village to raise a child" (1996). Sometimes it takes a global village, a group of people from various countries connected to each other through e-mail, to find solutions to a problem as serious as bullying. When I joined [bullying-support@yahogroups.com](mailto:bullying-support@yahogroups.com), recommended by the "bullying.org" website, I felt I had found that kind of village.

At first, never having belonged to such a group, I didn't know what to expect. Would group members welcome my queries about children's folklore, or would they find those questions intrusive? I needn't have worried. Two teachers and a parent replied immediately, sending me information and asking me to tell them more about my

interests. The ongoing dialogue was lively and interesting.

Within a few days, I had heard from teachers and parents in Canada, various parts of the United States, and Australia. One teacher at a public junior high school in Alabama assured me that name-calling was part of both bullying and everyday discourse: ". . . believe me the use of "Ho," "Yo mama," and "B" (bitch) are said every day 24-7. Both male and female students use them as a defense mechanism when they are upset without thinking" (Reese). A teacher in Australia wrote that "the most common form of bullying for both sexes is verbal. This includes teasing, harassment and name calling. It is the most painful" (Tamer). Just as the Opies found in collecting jeers for unpopular children, I discovered that there was a wide range of taunts for both girls and boys.

More compelling, though, were the stories of personal experience shared by parents of children who had suffered. Jill, who had learned about the support group from a television special on bullying in Indiana, shared details about what had happened to her eleven-year-old daughter:

She makes the honor roll and has long beautiful blonde hair (not from me. LOL). Several of the girls that have had trouble with grades, 1 in particular that was held back. . . was always telling my daughter that she is stupid and pulling her I keep trying to tell my daughter that this little girl just wishes she made better grades and had her hair. But when your daughter cries herself to sleep and does not want to go to a slumber party because of this other child, it is hard.

Others replied to Jill, offering consolation and advice. Two teachers suggested that Jill should ask administrators at her daughter's school to buy videos on bullying; several parents agreed. School administrators mentioned community conferencing and Spinclusion, both of which are designed to enhance dialogue and empathy. Lynn Zammit, the Coordinator of Choices for Youth Programs in Kitchener, Ontario, wrote about the Restorative Justice process, a conferencing model that brings the offender and victim together with school staff and community members. This process has been effective in dealing with gangs, school violence, bullying, truancy, and other difficult issues involving criminal charges (Zammit).

Another important idea that emerged from the group was to read what students have to say in "What Can Be Done About Bullying? Students Speak Out," by Ruth Rees (2002). Student-generated ideas include treating fellow students as one would like to be treated one

self, sticking up for fellow students, quickly reporting bullying incidents, and running year-long bullying programs; if nothing else works, a change of classrooms or of schools is recommended. Teachers should stick to the rules, monitor public spaces, handle troubling situations immediately, and impose progressively severe penalties (5-7).

At times the dialogue on this Internet support group became ideological. Julia, a Miami resident who grew up in Russia, wrote:

In Russia, sure there is a lot to be improved, BUT kids are being taught from the very beginning - by teachers and parents and everybody around - you should treat everybody equally no matter what, nobody is better than you are, nobody deserves to be hurt, everybody deserves to be treated friendly, etc. Here in the US I found out a lot of things that amaze me.

1. Schools do what's convenient for them, not for parents or children.
2. You can buy SpongeBob Squarepants video for \$10 and "Words can't hurt me," the one that really every school needs to see, is \$70! (Rivers).

One day later, Ana, who grew up in Cuba, expressed a different viewpoint: "The communist ideology did not protect in a special way anyone... I remember many bullies empowered by the ideological system" (Faya). It was clear that there was potential for more politically oriented dialogue, as well as more personal experience stories from diverse cultures.

Two mothers, Cindy Wesley and Fern Trithart, were central figures in the bullying support group. Their own stories were wrenching, powerful, and difficult to read. Both Cindy and Fern had lost their children because of bullying. Cindy's daughter, Dawn-Marie, died at age fourteen on November 10, 2000, in Mission, British Columbia. Reports of this tragedy were available on the Internet, but Cindy sent our group a more personal account:

On November 10, 2000 our youngest son found his sister who had hung herself. In her suicide note she named three girls who had bullied her at school, one being a police officer's daughter. For the first time in history bullies were charged. During the trial I sat through having to listen to how these girls tormented our daughter. The last words that our baby heard were "Dawn-Marie you are fucken dead." Am I thankful that the judicial system seems to be owning their part in this

out of control situation" (Wesley).

Cindy's story deeply saddened us all; this was the worst outcome that a bullying situation could produce. Many of us sent messages of sympathy. Faced with the starkness of this story, at first I did not want to analyze it as a folklore text; such analysis seemed disrespectful. However, as I read several renditions of Cindy's story, I realized that her narratives had become an important vehicle for activism. Cindy is the founder of PAVE, Parents Against Violence Everywhere, which has been a strong advocate for children's rights. Describing other parents' judicial challenges, she explains that "the process is very lengthy and parents usually give up midway" (Wesley). Her own story, telling of successful prosecution, gives strength and hope to other parents seeking justice in the courts.

Fern Trithart's story about the loss of her son is equally wrenching. Tyler Trithart died at the age of sixteen on May 25, 2001, in Chestermere, Alberta, Canada. He got into a fight with another teenaged boy over a girl, and the first punch was fatal. Sixty students watched the fight, which took place in a remote area where parents and teachers could not intervene. Although a trial was held, the boy who threw the first punch was not charged. Fern's recollections of Tyler's life are suffused with memories of bullying:

Losing a child to violence is different from losing someone. We had to endure a trial that blamed everything on Tyler not the boy or girl who dragged him into their issues. Tyler had a learning disability, he was not mean or violent, he was just an easy target to become involved in these kids' issues (Trithart).

Since Tyler's death, Fern has become an activist; she maintains a website on which she tells her son's story, urging young people not to engage in violent behavior (<http://www.iaredstory.com/tyler.html>). On this website, Tyler's death is described as a "bullycide." Fern regularly participates in the bullying support group, offering advice and encouragement to many people. Her courage, like the courage of Cindy Wesley, is extraordinary.

## CONCLUSION

I began this essay with stories about two teenagers, Ashley and Nathan, who were tormented by their peers in the winter of 2001. After two months of interaction with my bullying support group, I

found it appropriate to conclude with the stories of Dawn-Marie and Tyler, who did not survive being bullied. These stories provide eloquent proof of the need for more effective intervention and education. Folklorists, aware of the long-standing traditions of children and adolescents, can approach this crisis with an understanding of how young people's hierarchies function. As Ruth Rees's essay explains, asking students themselves to come up with solutions is a promising approach. Community conferencing also gives students a voice but tends to be managed by adults. In the "global village" of the Internet, parents and educators can discuss intervention techniques, sharing their opinions about what works and what doesn't work.

Several types of children's and adolescents' folklore have undergone reclassification. Bullying can be prosecuted as a crime; writing in Slam Books and planning dangerous pranks can result in suspension from school; name-calling can lead to sexual harassment charges; and exclusion rituals can cause school administrators to hire professional interveners like Rosalind Wiseman. Will the recently published folklore of "mean girls" result in policy changes in the future? By gathering stories and other kinds of data, folklorists can seek answers to that question and others. In the midst of social change, storytelling is one of the most powerful problem-solvers we have.

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#### NOTE

I would like to dedicate this essay to the memory of Dawn-Marie Wesley, 1986-2000, and Tyler James Grant Trithart, 1984-2001. Dawn-Marie's memorial website is <http://www.missioncity.ca/pave/dawnmariewesley/dawnmariewesley.htm>. Tyler's memorial website is <http://www.jaredstory.com/tvler.html>.

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