

From PEOPLE Magazine Vol. 73 No. 7, February 22, 2010

Suicide in South Hadley Bullied to Death?

By Liz McNeil

Phoebe Prince Had Beauty, Brains and Big Dreams. but Friends Say Relentless Taunting—and Vicious Smears on Facebook—by Some Girls at Her Massachusetts High School Led Phoebe to Kill Herself at 15

She picked out a black cocktail dress for the school dance—one with spaghetti straps and sequins, along with sparkly red shoes that reminded her of Dorothy's in *The Wizard of Oz*. A week before South Hadley High's cotillion, Phoebe Prince texted her friend Meghan Kennedy, bubbling with enthusiasm. "She said, 'I can't wait to walk around in this,'" Meghan, 15, recalls. "She was so excited." Several days later on Jan. 14, the 15-year-old was dead—found hanging in her closet by her little sister. "Everyone was just shocked," Meghan says. "I can't even explain the devastation."

So why did the beautiful girl, a recent transplant from Ireland who read Dante and dreamed of becoming a journalist, commit the ultimate self-destructive act? Friends say mean girls drove her to it—that Phoebe was relentlessly bullied in the classroom and online, where she was the target of insults and smears called out in the hallways and posted on Facebook. "Go kill yourself," students taunted. School district superintendent Gus Sayer confirms Phoebe was the victim of verbal and cyberbullying "intended to hurt her" but says she didn't report the behavior. While police pursue an investigation—criminal charges are seldom brought in bullying cases—school administrators say they have suspended several students, who now await a disciplinary hearing and could face expulsion. The school has also formed an antibullying task force. "Bullying is not tolerated at this school," Sayer says. Too little, too late, according to some parents who complain the 760-student public school has turned a blind eye to abusive behavior by students for years. "The bullies have gotten away with it," says Lisa Brouillard, 44, who says her daughter Becky, 17, was thrown into a locker and punched by one of Phoebe's tormentors a few days after her death. David Leonard, 53, says his daughter Nicole, 18, dropped out of South Hadley High last year because of relentless taunting by different students. "It was torture," Leonard says. "What happened to Phoebe—that could have been my daughter." Says Sayer: "Many times kids have been disciplined for bullying. We consider this a very serious problem."

For Phoebe—according to several close friends, some of whom declined to be named for fear of retribution—the problems began last fall, shortly after she moved from County Clare, Ireland,

with her mother, Anne, a schoolteacher, and sister Lauren, 12, to South Hadley, a New England town of 17,000 that's home to Mount Holyoke College and a mix of upscale and working-class families.

Warm and outgoing, Phoebe quickly attracted notice. "All the guys wanted to talk to her," says a friend. "But a lot of girls were jealous." After she briefly dated a football player who was involved with another girl, female students started calling her "Irish whore," friends say; some posted insulting messages on their Facebook pages. Superintendent Sayer says the school's investigation shows the smears were "everywhere she turned. She kept bumping into certain kids, and they insulted her."

The harassment took a toll, and while she might not have formally reported it, friends say Phoebe hardly kept it a secret. Naturally bright but an indifferent student, she'd recently been spotted outside class, iPod in hand, crying. "A few times my teacher would talk to her and try to help," one student says. Another student tried to pick a fight after calling her a "ho." "Phoebe would tell me how scared she was," Meghan says. "She wasn't a tough girl." A few days before her death, friend Nick Shenas, 15, recalls, "she wasn't herself. She said it was too much to deal with."

Certainly Phoebe had other concerns. Always close to her father, Jeremy, a gardener, she was having a difficult time adjusting to life without him—accounts vary as to why her parents were no longer living together—after moving to the rented top floor of a two-story house in South Hadley. "She would talk about how much she missed her dad," Nick says; one friend described her as upset over the separation. Says a family friend in Ireland: "She was having ups and downs, but nothing to the extreme."

Or so everyone thought—until Jan. 14, when once again, friends say, Phoebe suffered a barrage of insults, even on her way home. That afternoon she plugged her phone into the wall—perhaps to show the world the text messages that had terrorized her. Kevin Miele, who operates an auto-detailing shop next door, watched a dozen police cars pull up to the house. "It was horrible," he says. "The mother was hysterical." Anne and Jeremy Prince have declined to speak publicly. But before leaving Ireland to join his family, Jeremy confided to a friend his hope that some "good could come of this, that Phoebe's death could have some meaning." That remained to be seen on Jan. 18, as family and friends poured into Beers and Story Funeral Home in South Hadley to pay their respects and have one last look at a young girl with so much promise—wearing a black party dress that would never see a dance.

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The bullying Phoebe Prince endured is all too common. According to the National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center, nearly 30 percent of students in grades 6 through 10 have experienced bullying, and these days much of it is happening online. Off of school property, cyberbullies are harder to monitor and discipline. So what's a worried parent to do? Stay tuned in, says Mayo Clinic child psychologist Dr. Bridget Biggs. "Look for changes. Do they seem deflated while they're online or suddenly not want go to school?" Above all, Biggs says, "Listen. You never know when your teen may need to talk." safeyouth.org; isafe.org