

# “Kids can be cruel”

University students reflect on impacts of harassment, cyber-bullying



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The story of Amanda Todd has consumed the hearts of many over the past two weeks. Prior to her suicide, the 12-year-old posted a video on YouTube in which, through a series of written messages, she described the events leading up to her final decision.

After succumbing to online pressure to post nude photos of herself, Todd was blackmailed by a schoolmate to further exploit herself or risk the photos being mass distributed. After the blackmailer came through on the promise, Todd was harshly bullied and forced to move schools multiple times. Sometime

after, she was badly beaten up after sexually engaging with a boy, allegedly unaware that he had a girlfriend.

Two weeks ago, Todd took her life. In a prior event, she drank bleach and had to be hospitalised. The response on Facebook was cruel, with many peers criticising her failure to “successfully” kill herself. After she passed, a backlash of wildly inappropriate and harsh comments was unleashed on numerous social media sites.

This story raises a number of issues such as the prevalence of bullying in our society, the failure of authorities in handling the problem, and the lack of education for teens about the internet. A few

Lakehead and York university students, all of whom have personally experienced various forms of bullying, were willing to share their thoughts on this unfortunate, recent occurrence.

A Lakehead student who wishes to remain unnamed remarked, “I don’t think anyone deserves to have that happen to them. Regardless of whether she was doing something that’s questionable. . . . I think it’s a lot more wrong of someone on the internet to demand photos of a 12 year-old. She was just a little kid when it all started.”

Monica Zebrowski, recent Sheridan College grad and writer, disclosed her own experiences with bullying in high school. While she had friends outside of school, she recalled the horrible isolation and degradation she faced within: “Every Sunday, I would get this terrible feeling at the pit of my stomach, this horrible anxiety about going back to school. When we had to pick groups in class, nobody wanted me to be in their group, and old ‘friends’ would cringe when I would almost beg them to please be my partner. It was pathetic. The entire class treated me like dirt.”

Zebrowski added, “I would never want to re-live that time again. Kids can be really cruel. I had major depression issues early on in high school and had a lot of stuff to deal with.”

For Zebrowski, it was her best friend’s suicide that dissuaded her from taking further action. “When

he went, I turned my life around, a complete 360. I felt like he would have wanted me to do that. Losing Mike was very hard. It took a lot of therapy to really fully get over my loss. For years, I blamed myself for not having saved him.”

She added her reaction to Todd’s story: “I think many people can relate to bullying, but I was fortunate enough not to endure it when Facebook was popular. When I was bullied in school, I would skip class to get away from it all. Kids can’t do that anymore with cyber-bullying. I can’t imagine what that must be like.”

Another Lakehead student, also to remain unnamed, commented how the fact that Todd was still being slandered is what bothered her most. “Even in death, she is still being bullied by her peers. I think that’s probably the saddest thing about this. I mean, it’s absolutely horrid that a child died; but now, her parents go on Twitter or Facebook and see all these people talk about how she got what she deserved. I think that’s the most disgusting thing.”

The legality of several of Amanda’s experiences have also come under harsh scrutiny. Amanda was only 12 when a sexual predator asked for her photo and she was later beaten in school by her classmates. On this, a Lakehead student commented, “I think that a lot of the time, it’s more or less the government that lets the school determine how [kids] are pun-

ished. I think that if a student hits another student, then that’s harassment, causing bodily harm. I mean, that’s criminal and demands police involvement.”

The student added, “There definitely needs to be more measures taken by the police to track down the bullies and sex predators.”

Taylor Lawrence from York University agrees. “The government should consider no tolerance for bullying campaigns within schools, and also promote children and teens to have an appreciation for people whom are different, not just demographically, but individually.”

While he acknowledged that there is only so much that can be done to prevent bullying, Lawrence is adamant that there should be more programs and supports in place to help students cope with bullying, and more measures to penalize bullies through expulsions, suspensions, anger management classes, guidance counselling, and even criminal charges.

Zebrowski stressed, “The only way we are going to effectively combat bullying is to stand together as a community and make it looked unacceptable. There should also be more access for people who need treatment for depression. Sometimes, the waiting lists can be months long, this is too long.”

*The Globe and Mail* reports that Ontario MPs had a meeting on October 15 to discuss bullying, and are open to policy suggestions.