



DARRYL E. OWENS
Sentinel Columnist

Girl’s suicide shows disengaged parents really can be fatal

Last month, Rebecca Sedwick scaled a tower at an abandoned cement plant near her Lakeland home, walked to the edge and stepped out. She left a note. “I’m jumping and I can’t take it anymore.” Tragically fitting that her final words were transmitted to a friend via text message. Fitting, because authorities blame a destructive, nearly yearlong digital war of words waged via smartphone and social media for pushing the emotionally fragile 12-year-old over the edge. Words like “You’re ugly” and “Go kill yourself.” Since September, the Polk County Sheriff’s Office had been building its case against Rebecca’s tormentors. But a Facebook posting weeks after Rebecca’s funeral galloped police into action: “Yes ik [I know] I bullied Rebecca nd she killed her self but IDGAF [I don’t give a (expletive)]” Police last week arrested two girls: a 12-year-old and a 14-year-old. They appear the alpha dogs in a group of as many as 15 girls who police say hounded Rebecca to death. They face aggravated-stalking charges, a third-degree felony. For Sheriff Grady Judd, the older girl’s post-mortem post convinced him jail was warranted. Perhaps. In the vast majority of cases, I’d be more predisposed to side with experts such as Suzanne Bogdan, who specializes in education issues at a Fort Lauderdale law firm. Considering the girls’ development level, she argues “pursuing legal recourse ... is not a likely scenario for proper punishment or for curbing this behavior.” But I can’t disagree with Judd when he says that others bear part of the blame. Tragedies like this, he said, “can happen when parents don’t parent their children.” Bull’s-eye. With some 20 percent of kids now enduring cyberbullying, according to the Cyberbullying Research Center, Rebecca’s case sadly is symptomatic of a broader ill: disengaged parenting. It’s a particularly destructive lapse in the digital age, says Meg Fryling, an assistant professor of computer science at Siena College, who researches cyberbullying. “Unlike victims of traditional bullying, cyberbullying victims get no relief when they leave the school yard. The bullies can follow them home, sit at the dinner table with them, and even come into their bedroom at night.” Or help drive them to the grave. Like loaded guns, cellphones are a risk-reward proposition. In the right hands, they can protect. In the wrong hands, they can cause irreparable harm. “Parents who give a cellphone to children also have a moral obligation to check the texts, emails, and voice messages on those phones,” says Nancy Z. Hablutzel, who teaches a seminar called The Legal Rights of Children at the Illinois Institute of Technology Chicago-Kent College of Law. Indeed, police say Rebecca’s suicide shows the polar opposites of parenting. As a good parent would, Rebecca’s mom confronted school officials once she got wind of the bullying. When it continued, she home-schooled Rebecca and later moved her to another school. And she got Rebecca counseling. Meanwhile, the baneful barrages continued: “You should drink bleach and die.” It’s unclear what the alleged bullies’ parents knew before Rebecca’s death. But police advised both sets of parents of their daughters’ alleged involvement after Rebecca’s death — and weeks before the latest venomous Facebook barb. Unbelievable. It’s unpardonable if the girls’ parents didn’t confiscate their daughters’ devices after they learned of the bullying. Certainly, the most recent Facebook post argues otherwise. Still, Fryling reminds that even “if a parent finds a way to monitor such activity, the child [often] will find a workaround to conceal it.” That doesn’t mean parents should surrender. Research shows if kids know discipline awaits, they’re less likely to cyberbully. And parents must intervene when a child engages in digital mischief. “Parents have a responsibility in this day and age to be digital guardians,” says Rob D’Ovidio, associate professor of criminal justice at Drexel University. “This is not different than the role parents and guardians play in the physical world.” The galling thing in Rebecca’s case, Judd notes, is that all this should have been avoided: “Parents, friends, neighbors, they should take care of this.” Indeed, even in the Facebook Age, moms and dads must step up to *parenting*, not “friending,” their kids. Before another Rebecca takes her life. SMH.

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LOCAL NEWS BRIEFING

Lockheed Martin workers spruce up nonprofits

Staff report

About 1,000 Lockheed Martin employees gave back to the community Saturday as part of the United Way’s annual Day of Caring, renovating facilities at five nonprofit organizations in downtown Orlando. Workers, and their friends and family members, spent the day paint-

ing, landscaping and making repairs. The sites at which they worked included the Coalition for the Homeless, Women’s Residential and Counseling Center, House of Hope, Orlando Downtown Recreation Complex/Parramore Kidz Zone and the Salvation Army. “Lockheed Martin has a strong tradition of volunteerism and com-

munity engagement that is a cornerstone of the Corporation’s values and our culture,” Tom Oles, Lockheed Martin vice president of strategy and business development, said in a release announcing the Saturday event. The defense company’s Orlando operation employs about 4,000 people.

TRICKS, TREATS — AND DANGER



PHOTOS BY RICARDO RAMIREZ BUXEDA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The Castillo family — mom Princess, 23-month-old Isaiah, and Victoria, 7 — check out Halloween decorations at Spirit Halloween on East Colonial Drive recently. Halloween is the No. 2 national holiday for retail spending.

Halloween more than scary if safety not part of holiday

BY DESIREE STENNETT
Staff Writer

Halloween just isn’t scary without glowing spider webs draped over doorways, grim reapers and zombies hanging out on front lawns. Of course, we all know the goblins and ghouls at Spirit Halloween stores and other retailers are fake. But striking a balance between frightful fun and staying safe can be tricky during the scary season. Last week, a Brevard County man suffered severe burns while decorating for Halloween with gasoline, wood and candles. Then, last month, there was the Kentucky teenager who accidentally hanged himself in his front yard while attempting a Halloween prank on his sister. Even “safe” displays can cause chaos. Take the Oklahoma father who recently left two “dead bodies” in his driveway — a too-real decoration that prompted 911 calls from frightened neighbors. Trick-or-treating through neighborhoods can be dangerous, too, since kids wearing dark costumes at night are hard for drivers to see. That’s why children are four times more likely to be a victim of a fatal pedestrian crash on Halloween night than any other night of the year, the Florida Safety Council said. That happened in Central Florida in 2009, when an 8-year-old boy was struck and killed by an SUV as he ran across State Road 50 in Clermont on Halloween. “The last thing we want to do is have a child get hurt on a holiday when they just want to have fun,” said Dale Birenbaum, an emergency medical physician for Florida Hospital.

Birenbaum said along with car crashes, burns and cuts are some of the more common injuries related to the spookiest day of the year. “Costumes, kids and live fire don’t mix very well,” he said. Avoid using fire as a Halloween decoration, experts say. And be careful with those pumpkin-carving tools. Fortunately, consumer demand is prompting retailers to offer an ever-increasing supply of Halloween decorations — all options that are much safer than trying to build your own flaming displays. After all, Halloween has become the No. 2 national

Have a spooky safe Halloween

Health and safety experts are offering these Halloween safety tips:

- Avoid open flames: Instead of using real candles for jack-o-lanterns, use plastic, battery-operated tea lights or glow sticks instead.
- Make sure any electrical decorations you purchase are marked with “UL,” which means the product has been safety-tested by Underwriters Laboratories, a global safety consulting and certification company based in Northbrook, Ill.
- Choose costumes wisely: Be sure that masks don’t impair visibility, and go for the flame-resistant options. Also, choose brightly colored costumes or add reflective strips, wands or bracelets so motorists will see children.
- Keep sharp knives and tools away from pumpkin-carving kids: Nearly 20 percent of injuries associated with Halloween are hand injuries, mostly cuts.
- Check candy before kids gorge: The best part of the night for young children is likely coming home with piles of sweets. Make sure none of the loot has been tampered with before kids dig in.

SOURCE: National Safety Council



Decorations should be chosen for more than just appearance.

holiday in terms of retail spending — nearly 160 million Americans are expected to shell out about \$7 billion this season.

That means a lot of spending on everything from licensed costumes to elaborate animatronics of brain-eating babies with glowing eyes. “Heads turn, eyes glow, mouths move,” said Adam Shapiro, district manager for the Central Florida-area Spirit Halloween stores. “They interact with each other.”

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