



Teen Commits Suicide Due to Bullying: Parents Sue School for Son's Death

Family Wants No Money but Insists School Address Bullying and Three Other Suicides

By SUSAN DONALDSON JAMES

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Eric Mohat, 17, was harassed so mercilessly in high school that when one [bully](#) said publicly in class, "Why don't you go home and shoot yourself, no one will miss you," he did.

Now his parents, William and Janis Mohat of Mentor, Ohio, [have filed a lawsuit](#) in federal court, saying that their son endured name-calling, teasing, constant pushing and shoving and hitting in front of school officials who should have protected him.

The lawsuit -- filed March 27, alleges that the quiet but likable boy, who was involved in theater and music, was called ["gay," "fag," "queer" and "homo"](#) and often in front of his teachers. Most of the harassment took place in math class and the teacher -- an athletic coach -- was accused of failing to protect the boy.

"When you lose a child like this it destroys you in ways you can't even describe," Eric Mohat's father told ABCNews.com.

The parents aren't seeking any compensation; rather, they are asking that Mentor High School recognize their son's death as a "bullicide" and put in place what they believe is a badly needed anti-bullying program.

The lawsuit, filed in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Ohio, names school administrators Jacqueline A. Hoynes and Joseph Spiccia, as well as math teacher Thomas M. Horvath. None would comment on the allegations.

Parents Say Three Other Students Killed Themselves

The Mohats also claim that [bullying](#) was a "significant factor" in the deaths of three other students in Eric Mohat's class in 2007.

Mentor high school officials confirmed that a girl and two other boys in Eric's class had killed themselves in 2007.

According to Janet Klee, a counselor at Chrysalis, a suicide survivors support group, who counseled two of the surviving families, the suicides were connected to bullying.

"These kids," said Klee, "were extremely bright, and [the bullies] thought they were nerds. I say that not in a derogative but in a good sense. These were good kids who were easy targets for bullying."

Dan Hughes, whose son Brandon was a friend of Eric's, said he had withdrawn his son from Mentor High School after he was [relentlessly bullied](#). Brandon, now 19 and working, wrote a suicide note, citing the taunts, two weeks after Eric Mohat's death.

"What it boils down to is the football players, cheerleaders and kids with money have a different set of rules than everybody else," Hughes told ABCNews.com.

"It's not that much out of the ordinary, and the disturbing part is the school is more concerned about sweeping it under the rug than getting to the bottom of what's going on," he said.

Suicide-Bullying Connection

The National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center estimates that nearly 30 percent of American youth are either a bully or a target of bullying.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which established the resource center after the [Columbine shootings in 1999](#), every day an estimated 160,000 kids nationwide stay home from school because they are afraid of being bullied.

In addition, researchers at the Yale School of Medicine, in a new review of studies from 13 countries, have found signs of an apparent [connection between bullying, being bullied and suicide](#).

Almost all found connections between being bullied and suicidal thoughts among children. Five reported that bullying victims were two to nine times more likely to report suicidal thoughts than were other children.

In October, 14-year-old Jeremiah Lasater, who had been taunted and even had food thrown at him during lunch, locked himself in his Acton, Calif., high school bathroom and shot himself in the head.

In 2006, a St. Louis 13-year-old killed herself in a cyberbullying case. After she

was taunted over the Internet, [Megan Meier hanged herself in the closet of her family's home](#). Friends later said the suicide was triggered by a message, "The world would be a better place without you."

'Twiggy' Teased With Gay Slurs

Eric Mohat -- whose friends knew him as "Twiggy" for his lean, 6-foot-1-inch, 112-pound physique -- had a dry wit and musical talent, according to his mother, Jan Mohat. He had played piano for 13 years, enjoyed video games, anime, Harry Potter books and "cracking puzzles."

"By all indications he was a very nice, typical high school kid, kind of quiet and shy, but outgoing with his little group of friends," said the family's lawyer Ken Myers. "He seemed to have a quirky sense of humor and was also very sensitive."

The bullying "accumulated over time," Myers told ABCNews.com. "In math class, two or three picked on him constantly and mercilessly. Most of it was verbal, but they did some things like sitting behind him and flicking him in the ear, sticking stuff in his hoodie and putting eraser shavings on his head. Out of class they would shove him in lockers."

Much of the taunting was related to him being considered gay, though Eric Mohat's parents said the teen "didn't identify himself that way," Myers said.

"He may have looked effeminate, was in theater and would wear bright clothes," said Myers. "He was a skinny kid, and so the kids found something that bothered him and went for that."

The parents say Eric Mohat routinely ignored the teasing but complained to the teacher, who responded by moving the bullies' desks.

"The next day, they were back and it made it worse," said Myers. "They may have thought he was a snitch and the parents didn't know how bad it was."

Bullies Showed No Remorse

But March 29, 2007, one bully pushed Eric Mohat too far with a remark about killing himself, the lawsuit alleges. The teen took a legally registered gun from his father's bureau drawer, locked himself in his room and shot himself in the head.

At the time, Eric Mohat's older sister, Erin, was on a treadmill exercising. His after-school employer called their home to find out why he had not shown up at work.

Erin Mohat found her brother's body in his bedroom and called 911. Now 21, his sister is studying to be a school psychologist, something Jan Mohat said is now "a calling."

"My sister is my hero," [Eric Mohat had written on his MySpace page](#), though she was too late to save him.

Later authorities found a story Eric Mohat had begun to write about bullying. Days before, he had told his mother about the nonstop taunts in both class and in the hallways of the high school.

The family said school officials had been resistant to cooperate in the investigation and had insisted bullying was not a problem; the bullies never showed remorse.

"This is the first we heard that a suit was filed," said Justin Maynor, communications director for the Mentor Public School District. "We had a hunch it was coming."

Mentor High School, with 2,900 students, is one of the largest high schools in Ohio. It sits in a predominantly white, upper middle-class community surrounded by malls, 30 miles east of Cleveland.

In February 2008, the school beefed up security after a threat of violence, according to a report in the Cleveland Plain Dealer. One commenter on the newspaper's Web site responded, "Well, in my opinion, Mentor High is entirely too large and too crowded. ...With all those kids crammed in there, there's bound to be some fights."

But school officials said that was an isolated incident. "Generally, there is a very low incidence of violence at the school," said Maynor. "Considering its population, it's a relatively serene place."

Maynor confirmed that there had been "several" student suicides in the "last couple of years," but he said that they had no connection to bullying. He said the school had "come a long way" in combating bullying and addressing "social sensitivities."

School Says No Bully Problem

"We don't believe it's a problem," Maynor told ABCNews.com. "We have a program of anti-bullying education to raise awareness for students about what constitutes bullying and differences among students."

The school uses the Olweus Anti-bullying program, but the Mohats said the

program is ineffective for high school students. According to Olweus, which is based at Clemson University in Georgia, the program is designed for elementary and middle school children.

"The basic idea of Olweus is that a lot of kids are acting as bullies because they feel bad about themselves and it raises self-esteem," Mohat said. "But when a 200-pound linebacker hits a 100-pound kid, how can it help? He's already the alpha male in building."

A 2007 review of the Olweus program in the Journal of Adolescent Health concludes that it "had some mixed positive effects varying by gender, ethnicity/race and grade but no overall effect."

The Mohats allege that school officials urged students not to cooperate with the police investigation. "Nobody would take this seriously," said Myers. "We saw this horrendous bullying and no one could stop it."

The family was "trying to pick up the pieces and move on" when they learned there were other suicides in Eric Mohat's class that year, according to Myers. After the police investigation, the family wanted to "hold school officials accountable."

With the second anniversary of Eric Mohat's death and what would have been his 19th birthday this month, Jan Mohat said, "You could accept it if it were an accident, but the way he went is just not right."

"According to the kids who talked to us, his class was hell on earth," she said. But school officials took the attitude that "they are just being kids, boys are just being boys."

"When he came on and told us about what going on, I said I need to be involved, but he said, 'No, it's under control,' that the teacher had caught them and handled it," said his mother.

But days before the suicide, Eric Mohat told his mother, "I get picked on every day and I've got a whole nine weeks left. I can't do this anymore."

"We never had a chance to help him," she said, choking back tears.

"It shouldn't require legal action to get the school system to pay more attention to bullying than they do to their sports programs," said his father. "How many suicides is enough?"

ABC News' information specialist Melissa Lenderman contributed to this report.

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