

Girl's suicide after alleged attack troubles town

AP

By MARTHA MENDOZA | Associated Press – May 25, 2013



Associated Press/Marcio Jose Sanchez - Sheila Pott poses with a portrait of her daughter Audrie in Los Altos, Calif., Thursday, May 23, 2013. Audrie Pott committed suicide in September 2012 after being sexually assaulted by three boys during a house party in Saratoga, Calif. Photos of the incident were circulated around Pott's high school prompting the teenager to hang herself in a bathroom at home. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

SARATOGA, Calif. (AP) — One evening last Labor Day weekend, 15-year-old [Audrie Pott](#) walked up the driveway of a classmate's home alongside other teenagers. She'd told her parents she was spending the night with a friend. The friend claimed she was sleeping at Audrie's. Instead, the girls were having a party. A classic teenage ploy.

By all accounts, Audrie was a gorgeous girl. Her lush brown hair framed a heart-shaped face. Light makeup outlined her sharp brown eyes, but round cheeks gave her a childlike charm. She was a soccer player, a painter, a girl who at age 4 had the gumption to stand in front of 1,000 people in church and belt out a solo.

On that Sunday night, she was just another kid pushing the limits as she celebrated the last days of summer, getting drunk with her friends on vodka and Gatorade.

Police and a civil lawsuit outline allegations of what happened next: Three boys came into a room where Audrie had passed out. When she awoke the next morning, her shorts were off. Pictures were doodled on her body with a Sharpie. On one leg was the name of a boy, followed by the words "was here."

"My life is ruined," Audrie would tell a friend in a Facebook message over the coming days. "I can't do anything to fix it."

Soon Audrie learned about a photograph apparently making the rounds — of an intimate part of her body, taken, a family lawyer says, while she was passed out. "I have a reputation for a night I don't even remember," she wrote in another Facebook message, "and the whole school knows."

Eight days after the end-of-summer party, the sophomore who dreamed of traveling the world took her own life, hanging herself in a bathroom at home. Now the three boys, only 16 themselves, stand charged with sexual battery.

If the story of Audrie Pott rings familiar, it's because, tragically, it is. The federal government last year released data showing a rise in cyberbullying and youth suicide, including cases such as the 2010 death of Phoebe Prince, a 15-year-old Irish immigrant who hanged herself after bullying by classmates in South Hadley, Mass. Five students later accepted plea deals.

In Ohio, the rape of a 16-year-old girl last year was recorded on cellphones and gossiped about online. Two high school football players were convicted in the incident. And last month police in Canada reopened the case of Rehtaeh Parsons, a Halifax, Nova Scotia, teen whose family said she was photographed while being sexually assaulted in 2011 and bullied after the photo circulated online. Parsons died in April after hanging herself.

"How can our society provide a safe haven for young girls? Why do young men feel that young girls are but objects for their sexual fantasies and pleasure? Why do teenagers avoid seeking help when they are depressed and suicidal?" asked the pastor who delivered the eulogy for 17-year-old Rehtaeh.

Such questions come easily in the wake of these cases. Answers? Less so.

Now another community is left grappling with the loss of another girl, and [Saratoga](#) is asking its own questions. About blame and morality — but also what, if any, lessons can be learned from losing Audrie.

Saratoga is a bastion of calm tucked on the western edge of the Silicon Valley against the redwood-studded Santa Cruz Mountains. Baskets of geraniums dangle from streetlamps in the historic town of 30,000. Electric car-charging stations are installed in front of 130-year-old limestone buildings.

It's a community with some of the highest housing costs and incomes in the country, and it's known for its parks, its wineries — and its highly rated public schools. It's not a community that typically grapples with crime, let alone teen suicide.

"So many of us have lived here for years, and nothing like this has ever happened here before," said Mayor Jill Hunter, whose four sons graduated from the same school Audrie and the three suspects attended,

Saratoga High. "We're terribly sad. We're having to bide our time to find out what the courts say, what justice says."

Today sorrow flows in a quiet undercurrent through town. Friendly conversations and noisy cafes grow silent at the mention of Audrie's name. But at the high school and online, teenagers are speaking out — calling for more dialogue about what's right and wrong, and for more kindness among peers.

"Things have got to change," junior class president Anup Kar said in a story published by the Saratoga High student newspaper. "Students need to start helping other students. Someone needs to step up, and it can't just be the same people. It has to be every single student on our campus, making an effort to make our campus a better safer place."

Like so many schools in a cyber-saturated age, Saratoga High was trying to tackle these difficult topics.

Six months before Audrie committed suicide, a psychologist spoke about cyberbullying at the Saratoga High library. Earlier this year, the school held a "Just be Kind" week to encourage respect among classmates. And in March, art teacher Leah Aguayo gathered 85 girls for an empowerment workshop, at which teal-colored balloons — Audrie's favorite color — were released in her memory.

School Superintendent Bob Mistele said student assemblies and parent-staff meetings are held regularly to address bullying, and that his staff receives training about mandated reporting requirements when a student brings a complaint.

"Keeping our schools safe and free from bullying is a high priority for all of us," Mistele said in a statement last month in response to Audrie's case. "We share a common responsibility to stand up to and speak out about inappropriate, harassing behavior whenever we see it, hear about it, or view it on the Internet."

Mistele's office declined further interview requests, citing privacy and legal concerns.

Nationally, anti-bullying statutes and programs have proliferated since Georgia became the first state to pass a measure in 1999. Forty-nine states now have bullying laws on the books, while documentaries about tragic cases and national campaigns such as Stop Bullying Now! have brought increased attention to the problem.

In Audrie's case, like the incidents in Ohio and Canada, a sexual assault is also alleged, however — something experts said mothers and fathers must talk to their children about, just as they might discuss drug and alcohol use.

"Parents, when they sit down and talk to their kids, it's about drinking, not sexual assault," said Rosalind Wiseman, an author of books focusing on the lives of teenagers and an expert in bullying. Wiseman suggested that parents reinforce the idea that it's OK for children to go to them when they think something inappropriate has occurred.

"I would like for parents to include when they talk to their kids, 'If something bad happens to you or one of your friends, please know that is more important to me than if you got drunk or did something else you shouldn't have,'" she said.

Cyberbullying expert Nancy Willard said adults need to focus on positive norms, "recognizing that the vast majority of teens ... have an extremely low regard for anyone who distributes a nude image of a peer," she said.

Teens also need to know that if they are involved in a bullying situation — or something worse — it's safe to tell an adult, Willard said.

"Even if an image has been distributed, this is something that they can recover from," she said. "So let an adult they trust know what is happening. If a friend is being exploited in this way, they should reach out to let their friend know they are there for support and advise their friend to tell a trusted adult."

Audrie, it seems, confided in few. In the week following the alleged assault, she instead did what so many young people do: She shut down and suffered in silence — reaching out to only a few friends with increasing desperation.

Before that Labor Day weekend, Audrie was a bright girl dealing with normal teen challenges. She spent summers at horse camp, played viola and piano. On winter slopes, her parents recalled, she sang as she skied. On hikes in the local hills, she marched her friends until they had blisters. At 11, Audrie beamed as she strode, without gloves or jacket, on a frigid day with her middle school color guard in President Barack Obama's first inaugural parade.

When Audrie started Saratoga High as a freshman, the school paper interviewed her. She was excited about playing soccer, eager to go to a dance, concerned about homework. Her optimism was palpable.

Question: "Would you rather fly or be invisible?"

Audrie: "Fly any day."

But as freshman year got underway, Audrie was picked on by some classmates, her parents said, prompting them to ask for a meeting with school officials. Her parents said they raised concerns about Audrie being bullied. School officials have countered that "the issue of bullying was not the subject covered in those conversations."

"She was picked on because she was pretty, because she was popular, because she was nice," her father, Larry Pott, told the San Jose Mercury News. "It was: You're not as good as you appear to be. We're going to drag you down a bit."

Her stepmother, Lisa Pott, said in the same interview that Audrie was neither depressed nor on medication.

"She had no more teen drama than I did," Lisa Pott said.

One week after the Labor Day party, Audrie called her mother from school and asked to be picked up. "She said, I can't deal with it, please take me home," recalled Sheila Pott, who brought her daughter to their Los Altos home and begged her to share what was going on. But Audrie couldn't put words to her pain. That same day, she hanged herself.

As they buried Audrie, her parents had no idea about an alleged assault, let alone that school officials, alerted by students about the party and the picture, had already gone to the Santa Clara County Sheriff's Office, which launched an investigation.

Then the Pott family began getting phone calls. "There was information some of the children had that they felt would be vital for us to find out," Larry Pott said.

The three boys accused in the case were charged in the fall but remained in school (one transferring elsewhere) until April 11, when sheriff's deputies arrested them on charges of sexual battery and distribution of child pornography. Attorneys representing the teens, whose names have not been released because of their ages, urged the public to withhold judgment.

"Much of what has been reported ... is inaccurate. Most disturbing is the attempt to link (Audrie's) suicide to the specific actions of these three boys," said a statement from attorneys Eric Geffon, Alan Lagod and Benjamin Williams. "We are hopeful that everyone understands that these boys, none of whom have ever been in trouble with the law, are to be regarded as innocent."

The Pott family has sued the boys and their families, and filed an administrative claim against the Los Gatos-Saratoga Union High School District, alleging that administrators were slack in responding to bullying against Audrie. "With no assault, with no cyberbullying, Audrie is in art class right now," Larry Pott said at a news conference last month, his voice breaking.

The Potts also have launched the Audrie Pott Foundation to support local music and art scholarships in Audrie's memory, as well as youth counseling. And they are pressing for a change in state laws to stiffen penalties for cyberbullying and assault.

At Saratoga High, meantime, students went through an all-too-common cycle of grieving: A candlelight vigil and counseling sessions were held. Flowers piled up outside the library. Students wore clothing in Audrie's favorite color.

Now, months later, questions remain, but their young lives go on. Springtime at the high school means prom, college acceptances, final exams. There are track meets and pancake breakfasts.

This week the students have Memorial Day off, a rare three-day weekend before the rush of finals. If Audrie were alive, she probably would have celebrated on that school-free Monday. It would have been her 16th birthday.

Response Questions - Please discuss each topic below intelligently, in at least a few sentences per topic. Be sure to answer all parts of each topic.

1-One important aspect of this story is that it is about a **sexual assault**. Two questions posed by a church pastor in the article are as follows: *“How can our society provide a safe haven for young girls? Why do young men feel that young girls are but objects for their sexual fantasies and pleasure?”* **Can you offer any answers to these questions? Why do you think there are teenaged boys who think it is okay to commit assaults like this? And why do you think there are also teens who will allow such an assault to happen, rather than stepping in and stopping it immediately?**

2-Another important aspect of this story is that it is about **cyberbullying**—the social humiliation of Audrie Pott by spreading nude photos and rumors of her via the internet and cell phones. In a statement made in response to Audrie Pott’s case, Saratoga School Superintendent Bob Mistele said: *“Keeping our schools safe and free from bullying is a high priority for all of us.... We share a common responsibility to stand up to and speak out about inappropriate, harassing behavior whenever we see it, hear about it, or view it on the Internet.”* **In situations like this one, why do you think teenagers take part in the spreading of such photos and rumors, rather than speaking out and putting a stop to it immediately? If this incident had occurred involving a student at Carmel High School and you or your friends had found out about it via text message or the internet, what do you think you or your friends would have done? Why?**

3- According to cyberbullying expert Nancy Willard, teens need to know that if they are involved in a bullying situation—or something worse—it's safe to tell an adult: *“Even if an image has been distributed, this is something that they can recover from.... So let an adult they trust know what is happening. If a friend is being exploited in this way, they should reach out to let their friend know they are there for support and advise their friend to tell a trusted adult.”* **What do you think of Nancy Willard’s advice? Why do you think Audrie Pott did not tell her parents or any other adults about what she was going through? Can you explain why victims like Audrie remain silent, rather than seeking help?**

4-Recently we finished reading the novel *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson. **What are the important similarities between what happened to Audrie Pott and what happens to Melinda Sordino in *Speak*? Also, what are the important differences between what happened to Audrie Pott and what happens to Melinda Sordino in *Speak*? By comparing the true story of Audrie with the fictional story of Melinda, what do you think we can learn? Where do you think we have work to do as a society? Are there specific things that teenagers can do to prevent incidents like this from occurring in the future?**