

MSU – Katrina Tagget Fellowship 2014

Thank you for the privilege of speaking today. What the RCPD does for students with learning disabilities like our daughter Katrina is nothing short of amazing. From orientation onwards, the RCPD was extremely supportive of our daughter Katrina while she was a student at MSU.

I'd like to introduce you to Katrina (her picture is on the back of the RCPD brochure). She was a vibrant young woman with blond curly hair, and a brilliant smile. She loved school, but her success was hard earned. Katrina was dyslexic and ADD. She couldn't read until the fourth grade and her ADD was not diagnosed until college. So, it was incredible she had achieved a 4.0 GPA in her major and an overall 3.74 GPA. RCPD was instrumental in her success at MSU.

In her own words from her personal statement for her application to MSU,

“As a child, I thought I was stupid. I couldn't read even a simple street sign. I memorized books according to the pictures on the page. I continue to have trouble remembering things. I have to really concentrate to read, and sometimes I have to read a paragraph several times to understand the meaning. I can read the same sentence several times without finding any grammatical errors, but someone else may find several errors. I am not dumb, and I am not lazy. I am dyslexic. I can't learn the way other kids learn. At seventeen, I am functioning well, but it has been a long struggle to get to where I am today.

No IEP, no 504. She worked at negotiating accommodations for her learning disability, class by class, teacher by teacher. As she wrote about her learning disability,

“Everyday I must live with my dyslexia. It is frustrating having to always read and reread parts of books or my own work in order to seek perfection, but I refuse to give up. I feel that learning can be very enjoyable. Learning has become all the more precious to me because of the hard work and concentration I must use as a result of my dyslexia. The challenge of living with dyslexia will be with me forever, but I see being dyslexic as a positive challenge that can bring me much success and happiness.”

When she got to MSU, the RCPD was instrumental in helping level the playing ground for her. She became a mentor for RCPD, helping other students with disabilities navigate the challenges of college life. By helping others she helped herself. As she said when interviewed for an article her junior year after earning Samaritan Scholar award, "Being involved in the RCPD has opened my mind to the realization that people have all sorts of disabilities. It's enlightening to see how people struggle to overcome them."

In time, Katrina saw her dyslexia and ADD in a positive light, no longer a secret, she accepted her learning disabilities were part of what made her her. So, why then couldn't she see her mental illness was nothing to be ashamed of?

That's the big secret we will never know the answer to because on September 20, 2008, Katrina died by suicide. We just thought she was moody, "aren't most teenagers?" surely she would grow out of this. She binge drank like many college students. She was so highly functioning and a gifted young woman, how could someone like Katrina, with everything to live for, take her life?

A millions lives are lost every year to suicide worldwide; 41,000 in the US. This may not seem like a lot, but think of this way, ½ as many people die by homicide, and there is about the same number of people that die of breast cancer as kill themselves. Suicide is a growing national problem that is not given the attention it deserves. Our family has learned the hard way the realities of suicide.

Our young especially are at risk – CDC reported last year that suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death among 15-24 year olds and it's a fact that 1,100 college students take their lives every year.

For Katrina, she was such a hard worker, almost a perfectionist, and had severe anxiety which then fueled a depression and put her at risk. She kept her struggle to live secret from us, thinking irrationally that she was a burden to us and our lives would be better without her.

25% of Americans are struggling with some form of a mental illness every year. 50% of college students report feeling so depressed they can't function. If you think of mental illness like a cancer of the brain, it is much more understandable. Like cancer, mental illness can be properly diagnosed, properly treated, and left untreated or the wrong treatment, can be fatal. Not everyone who has depression will kill themselves, but 90% of those who die by suicide have a diagnosable and treatable mental health disorder. Katrina was one of those 90%, and if those around her, including myself, had understood her risk of suicide, she could have been saved. She was worth saving. Everyone is worth saving.

Katrina was a beautiful, smart, and kind young woman who gave us 21 years of memories, love, and joy. She enriched our lives more than she could ever understand – her depression and anxiety prevented her from seeing herself as we all saw her. We all thought Katrina was an incredibly strong person, but what she accomplished in her life while battling depression, she had unimaginable courage. She was a gift to us and all who knew her while she was alive and she is still a gift even in death. Because now she is helping us to be more aware of the risk of suicide – it is very very real. Her suicide was but one moment in an all too brief life, but it doesn't define her.

I think just as in life she helped others, so she continues after her death. The myth that talking about suicide encourages suicide is just that, a myth. Talking about suicide prevents suicide by taking away the shame, silence and stigma we all associate with suicide and mental illness. I wish I had better understood Katrina's pain when she was alive, but hopefully, what we know now, and sharing that knowledge in memory of her and others that died by suicide will save lives that would have otherwise been lost had we not had the courage to speak up.

Katrina is going to help us right now. If you have a cell phone, could you please take it out and open your contacts. I would like you to add the crisis hotline, call it whatever you want – Crisis ... Get Help ... The phone number is **1-800-273-8255**. This is a number we should all know just like we know 911. I hope if you or someone you know is in crisis, needs to talk to someone, you will call this number or pass the number to them.

Thank you all for allowing me to speak about Katrina. I will end my speech with a word to the Katrina Tagget Fellow 2015. The Katrina Tagget Fellowship is a fully endowed scholarship awarded annually to a student who is a living representative of all that Katrina was and could be – strong academics, has a disability which impacts their learning, and has a focus on community service. Courage and Perseverance are two words that define Katrina but they also define you. I sent her off to college with a coffee mug that said, "Go confidently in the direction of your dreams, live the life you imagined" by Henry David Thoreau. Just as I hoped for Katrina to live her dreams, I now hope for you to live yours in memory of Katrina. Thank you for all that you have done to become a Katrina Tagget Fellow and being a living legacy of our daughter.