

Boy who was bullied wears his feelings on his shirt

By Melissa Hale-Spencer

GUILDERLAND — A 14-year-old boy who was bullied at school for years wore a T-shirt to Guilderland High School last month that said, "School is friggin' crap." His mother was called to pick him up from school, which she says is unfair.

"That's the way he feels about school," said Beth Plue. "Since sixth grade, school has gone downhill fast. He was bullied." She described social exclusion and physical attacks that, she said, led her son, Nathan Plue, to threaten suicide.

His aunt wrote a letter to the *Enterprise* editor in which she quotes her nephew as saying, "But that's what I think of school. Am I not allowed to have my own opinion?"

She writes, "I ask you, at what age do our children have the right to an opinion?"

For the dean of freshmen, Peter Schwan, it is not a free-speech issue, but rather one of maintaining respect in school.

On May 20, the day Nathan Plue wore the controversial T-shirt to school, a teacher sent him to Schwan's office.

"I felt it was a slap in the face of education," Schwan said of the shirt's message. "I asked him to turn it inside out. When he refused, I said I'd have to call his parents. I wanted to enlist them to see my point of view."

Schwan said he often calls parents in such situations and they are usually supportive. After Nathan talked to his mother, he still refused to turn his shirt inside out so she came to get him, Schwan said.

Although his aunt termed Nathan's going home from school early a "suspension," Schwan said it wasn't. "It was just a parent coming to get a child, relieving a situation," he said.

Two years ago, T-shirts at Guilderland made news when a group of seniors, on the last day of classes, wore shirts with the message "FUGHS."

"It supposedly stood for Former Undergraduate of Guilderland High School," said John Whipple, the principal at the time. "What would you do with that shirt?" he asked *The Enterprise* in a tone of exasperation. Without having something indecent spelled out, he said, it was a "subjective evaluation." The students were not sent home.

Dress code

Schwan sent *The Enterprise* a copy of the current student dress code, from the student handbook. The code makes three stipulations about dress, grooming, and appearance — that it shall:

— Be safe, appropriate, and

not disrupt or interfere with the educational process;

— Be free of items that are vulgar, obscene, libelous, or denigrate others on account of race, color, religion, creed, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, or disability;

— Be free of the promotion and/or endorsement of the use of alcohol, tobacco or illegal drugs and/or encouragement of other illegal or violent activities.

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Schwan said it is left up to administrators to "make the call" on what is appropriate. Students are not allowed to display such hate symbols as swastikas, he said. Students are first asked to cover or remove offensive messages or symbols, he said; if they refuse, they can be sent home; and, if it continues, disciplinary action, such as suspension, can be taken.

Schwan said decisions are "pretty much" made on a case-by-case basis.

Asked if it made a difference that Nathan Plue had been bullied and may therefore have strong feelings against school, Schwan said no. He conceded, "It was a tough call...I just felt some things are offensive and you have to draw the line."

Schwan went on, "This year a small group of kids were outspoken in terms of someone of a different color — we had to deal with that. They have a right to an education, but how far can you go when you say that's not fair to have other students feel uncomfortable?"

Two African-American students were arrested for fighting in the school cafeteria on Halloween with a white student who, police say, called them "nigger." One of them has sued the school district, claiming it did not intervene to stop ongoing discrimination and bullying.

This school year, the district launched an anti-bullying campaign to educate all students and staff members on how to prevent harassment.

Barbara Fraterrigo, a school board member who chairs the board's policy committee, explained that the high-school dress code is derived from a "generic dress code" included in the district's Project SAVE plan, required by the state's Safe Schools Against Violence in Education Act. That plan's code is identical to the high school's except it has a lengthy addendum stating that "violent activities" do

not include sports such as hunting, trapping, archery, or martial arts.

"The middle school has a more detailed dress code and the high school is working on it," said Fraterrigo.

"What the school is trying to establish is an atmosphere of respect and good language," she said. If a student is unhappy at school, rather than wearing a derogatory message, she said,

"What I would like to see him do is to go to the authorities — go up the chain of command."

Told that he and his family felt stymied when they sought help, Fraterrigo, also a member of the district's anti-bullying task force, responded, "We ended up with the task force so people could get the support they needed. We've upped our social workers. We have tried to put in place all kinds of supportive personnel so kids in trouble have someone to reach out to."

As part of its efforts to combat harassment, Guilderland conducted a districtwide survey on bullying earlier this year. The survey found that over a quarter of Guilderland students are afraid of bullying some of the

walls while the teachers weren't looking. A girl moved his chair across the classroom and would knock his papers off his desk."

She went on, "When he'd go to the cafeteria, the kids wouldn't want to sit with him. Once that happens, no one wants to be with him. They would shun him," she said, so as not to risk losing friends or social standing.

"We would drive him to school because we couldn't get him to go," she said. They would arrive early, so he could go directly to the learning lab, where students with special needs are helped, but often, she said, Nathan wouldn't want to go.

"He would be in tears and couldn't get out of the car," she said. "He threatened to kill himself."

For half of sixth grade, he was taught by a teaching aid at home. "She was great," Plue told *The Enterprise* in a phone interview this week.

He returned to school in seventh grade, she said, moving from Mohawk to Hiawatha house. "It started all over with a new group of kids," said Plue. "I pulled him and home-schooled him."

Progress was made in eighth grade when he was put with a friend he had had in elementary school, she said. "He made it through the school year," Plue said. "We paid for a social worker and psychologist ourselves...Now we're up to ninth

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grade. He still has..." she said, her voice trailing off as she searched for a word.

"Moments," said her son, completing the thought for her as he listened from home to his mother's side of the phone interview. He did not want to talk to *The Enterprise* himself but let his mother speak for him.

"Moments," continued his mother, "where he doesn't like school. It could be a funny look or a comment or when he saw a fight in the cafeteria."

She went on, "He wants to fit in at school. Kids wear black and chains, so he wears this type of clothing. He picked out this shirt," she said of the T-shirt with the message "School is friggin' crap."

"I checked it on-line and it had no swear words," Plue said. "He said it's his opinion and it's not saying anything bad."

The first time Nathan wore the shirt to school, his teacher asked

him to turn it inside out and he did, his mother said. The second time, on May 20, Plue stated, the teacher said, "Mr. Plue, come here. What did I say about that shirt?" He was sent to Mr. Schwan's office."

Referring to Schwan, Plue went on, "The principal called me and said, 'You have to come pick him up...It's degrading to the teachers who chose this profession. He refused to turn it inside out.' They escorted him out."

She went on, "My feeling it it's his opinion...I see no one to blame but the school for that."

'Under the radar'

Plue blames teachers and administrators for not stopping the bullying. "When he was bullied, they would always ask, 'What did you do to provoke it?' He didn't do anything to provoke it. Why do they always ask the victims?"

"It's never the other kids. I hear other children wear swastikas on their shirts or necklaces; how is that not degrading anyone who's Jewish?"

Plue said, when she would complain about her son's being bullied, school staff would tell her that it happens "under the radar."

"That's what they say — as if they can't notice it. Really, it's that the teachers don't want to get involved."

As an example, she described a seventh-grade field trip she took with her son to the state museum. The class lunched at McDonald's afterwards.

Nathan sat with his mother, away from the other children; he had his back to them, she said. She could observe the children at one table mixing a concoction of their drinks together in one cup. The ringleader of the group then presented the cup to Nathan, telling him to drink it. She shook her head no, and wouldn't let him.

Later she said, she asked the ringleader's father, "Does he do that at home?"

The father responded, "They were just having fun," she reported.

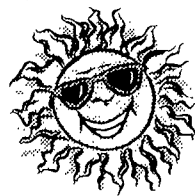
Plue went on, "Those teachers never said a thing. The teachers are either intimidated by the students and are afraid to say anything or they just aren't paying attention."

Plue said she has asked her son not to wear the shirt to school again. "With all the problems he has faced and overcome, I don't want him having more problems."

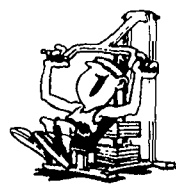
She concluded about her son's wearing the shirt, "I'm praying that he doesn't do it again. After being picked on for so long, he was starting to feel a little independent; I didn't want to yank that away from him."

She said of her son feeling good about himself, "We're still struggling with that every day."

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4-H pair receive sheep

ALTAMONT — Two local 4-H members, Jordan Burns and Rickey Lavare, have received lambs from Sharon Ansell.

She donated four natural-colored ewes to the Empire State Sheep Producers Association Lamb Program. The program was started in 1997 in memory of Andrea Walsh.

Lambs are given to children to care for, raise, and show at fairs. So far, 49 lambs have been given to youth as part of the program, which is chaired by Don Otterness of Altamont.