

## RYAN HALLIGAN: CYBERBULLIED

Ryan's parents say kids started teasing him in fifth grade. "When Ryan came to me and said he was being picked on, my initial response was: 'It's just words. You need to just ignore him,'" says his dad, John. The bullying continued on and off until seventh grade. To his parents' surprise, Ryan said he was becoming friends with one of his bullies, but things quickly took a bad turn. "He spread a rumor around the school and online that my son was gay," John says. "It was like a feeding frenzy. All of a sudden, kids who normally didn't bully Ryan got in on the so-called fun."



Ryan started getting vulgar, homophobic e-mails but didn't tell his parents. He also began long online chats with a girl he liked—which turned out to be a devastating setup. "In front of her friends, she told Ryan: 'Look, you're just a loser. I don't want anything to do with you. I was just joking,'" says John, who says he learned about the incident later. "She and a friend started to laugh." A humiliated Ryan said girls like them made him want to kill himself. A month later, Ryan hanged himself in the bathroom of his home. "I remember screaming: 'Why? Why?'" Kelly says. "I didn't understand it. He just seemed so happy."

"If I had the opportunity to talk to Ryan right now, I would say: 'Ryan, I love you. I want to make sure you understand that I love you. We're going to be together again someday,'" John says.

John says he had no idea his son was being harassed online until after his death, when he signed on to his son's instant messaging account. It was there he says he learned of the taunts—and found evidence of his son's deep depression. "It was very clear he had been contemplating and actually planning this final act," he says.

John says he received some closure after confronting the bullies who taunted his son. John says he told the girl who embarrassed Ryan that he didn't believe she would have done what she did if she knew Ryan would kill himself. "When we met, she held me so tight, and I felt the sorrow and I felt the remorse," he says.

John also spoke with the boy who bullied Ryan. "It took a few more steps, but in the end, he also broke down and cried and gave me a very sincere, heartfelt apology," John says. "He finally got in touch with the level of pain that he had brought to Ryan as well."

John says it's important to realize they are just kids. "Tragically, I don't think they were in touch with the pain they were causing," he says. "Because I know they would not have done what they did if they knew the outcome would be this."

Through it all, John says he doesn't blame any person or event for Ryan's death. "In the end, I believe my son died of an illness called depression, and I believe the depression came about because of the toxic middle school environment that he was in at the time," he says. "Tragically, it went undetected and untreated, but I think there are so many kids like him out there that are at risk."