

**AC360°**

News and commentary — direct from the AC36



## Crystal Bowersox: 'Just Imagine...'

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Crystal Bowersox: 'If you, or your child is being bullied, I encourage you to take the battered mind and spirits, and lift them up.'

**Crystal Bowersox**  
**Special to CNN**

**Editor's note:** Bullying is in our schools, and it's online. Why do kids do it? What can be done to put an end to it? Don't miss an "AC360°" special report in collaboration with PEOPLE Magazine, "Bullying: No Escape," all this week at 10 p.m. ET on CNN.

Bullying is not acceptable at any age, for any reason. To my adolescent mind, the reasons why my peers treated me poorly were cruel and insignificant; and mostly for reasons that were completely out of my hands. I experienced what seemed like constant emotional bruises and jabs, repetitive negative verbiage, name calling, and harassment not only within the walls of my home, but also in the halls of my school. I understand that growing up is tough for everyone. It's not an easy task for pliable minds to weave through the labyrinth known as puberty. But there are lines in this human experience that are not meant to be crossed so furiously and frequently.

I was often picked on for being poor. My brothers and I were part of the low-income school lunch programs, so our lunches were free. My clothes were never name brand or new, and usually rust stained due to hard water. I remember feeling so proud of myself for making the junior high school swim team, then hassled for attending meets wearing a used Goodwill suit because we couldn't afford the team ones and gear. In the winter season, I smelled like a camp fire and kerosene because our mother would use anything to heat the house, i.e. kerosene heaters -pluming smoke into the middle of the living room, or old shoes or garbage to stoke the wood-burning stove in the kitchen. My home life was beyond humble. At school, I was punished for it. I was also taunted by a few students for being diabetic. I was diagnosed at the age of 6, so these taunts started early on and were usually based upon fear and/or curiosity. Literally, students used the word, "Diabetic!!" as an insult among sneering and scoffing when I would eat something in class. I later learned to manipulate my health to miss school, because I dreaded being there so, and the hospital felt safer than home.

There are a few incidents that I remember quite vividly. I've managed to let go and block out a lot of things, but this one has stayed in my mind. School had just let out. I was headed to the bus, when I was suddenly pelted with ice. A few of the Varsity jackets had taken snowballs dipped them in water, which then turned into baseball-sized hail, and began stoning me. In pain, I tried to throw the ice-snowballs back, to no avail. I went home that night with my body and my spirit, black and blue.

There are far too many incidents to relive and write, but I will tell you this: the abuse that I encountered while attending public school drove me mad. I remember feeling suicidal all of the time, between dealing with a brawling, unkempt home life and the bullying at school. A pivotal moment for me was when I had learned to tie a slip knot, and spent a few hours staring at a noose. I had hung the rope over a rafter in the barn. I just stared at it, wanting to slip it over my head with almost every fiber of my being, but couldn't bring myself to do it. I felt that I had no place in the world, or even in the cafeteria until I was invited to sit with the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) kids. There I was accepted, straight, poor, diabetic, and all. I saw and heard some of the most demeaning things from other students directed at these kids. Immediately through association, I was branded and sent to slaughter, as well.

I left public school in what was supposed to be my junior year. My grades had fallen so much that I was held back. I had been playing gigs and shows around town through all of this, and music and writing was my only passion, love or friend. I was approached by a teacher who was working at the Toledo School For the Arts, a Charter school that was in its first experimental year. My father and I jumped at the idea of attending a school where kids played guitar in the halls before class, or were graded on their level of creativity and inventiveness. Not only did TSA offer me a place I could fit in, it offered me hope.

Even at TSA, it was hard to do well due to stress at home and illness, but I was a much happier and hopeful. Music and art were my saviors, and my parents and teachers knew it. And despite some lingering behavior issues, I excelled at the classes I was most interested in. When I was about 17 1/2, a light bulb came on above my head. I realized that when you turn 18, the only person you have to answer to is yourself. Bullies are no longer bullies; they can be legally punished for harassment and assault. Your parents can no longer tell you to go to your room if you chose to be independent and live elsewhere. When you act out of frustration and participate in self-destructiveness, you are the only person being defeated. I moved to Chicago, where the streets made me even more aware of how much bigger the world is than high school, and of all the limitless, positive, and productive possibilities in life just waiting to be seized.

If you, or your child is being bullied, I encourage you to take the battered mind and spirits, and lift them up. In light of the recent youth suicides, I beg for parents, teachers, and students to take responsibility and open your ears and eyes, and your hearts. It is imperative that a child or adolescent's cry for help be heard, no matter how silent it may be. Empathy and sympathy are characteristics that one embodies early in life and they begin in the home. We can only hope that the lessons we give to our young ones will be carried on throughout their days and years. Apathy and antagonism, unfortunately, are also sprouted from the very same seeds. Our children need to understand how their actions, inactions, and reactions will affect the chain of life's events not only on a local level, but also in a global way. There are adults who still do not understand how it's all connected. .

In this life, we are only victims if we allow ourselves to be. You may say I'm a dreamer, but dreams can become reality if we project love, acceptance, tolerance, kindness: if only EVERYONE did this -

Just imagine...

-Crystal Bowersox

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Crystal Bowersox dropped by the Anderson Cooper 360 studio to tape a special town hall report on bullying that will air next Friday, October 7 at 10 pm on CNN.

Anderson Cooper aired a short preview clip of a roundtable that included Dr. Phil McGraw, and Crystal, who spoke of the bullying she endured as a teenager. Cooper also aired a special clip of Crystal performing "Farmers Daughter" for the staff after the taping. Later, Cooper tweeted a photo of the pair, calling Crystal's voice "amazing".

