

Sara Marquardt

Professor Stowers

English 1000

4 February 2018

A Face Without a Page

The ceramics room was absorbed with a sticky heat from the kiln despite being the middle of winter. It was first period in December. Groggy at 7:45am nobody said much of anything. Something was in the air though; maybe it was the hushed way the teachers were whispering to each other that made me feel this way. We sat. We waited for the day to begin. The intercom crackled to life as it does every morning, but rather than our student body president, Morgan, the voice that rang out belonged to our Principal Dr. Lee, known by the students as The Bear. It was rare that The Bear made an appearance outside of her cave, so when her nasally voice greeted Central Highschool everyone was taken aback. Rather than the lunch menu and the score of last night's basketball game The Bear spoke as though reading from a script:

“Many of you may not yet know, a fellow student passed away last night”

A moment of silence was held in her honor, though everyone spoke in hushed gossip through her moment. Alexis Brown. A small, blonde, sophomore girl had committed suicide just hours before. The ceramics room had a moment of panic, then relief, a girl in our class was also named Alexis Brown. She was a cheerleader, she hadn't killed herself, the school was relieved that it wasn't her.

Everybody had something to say about the suicide that had struck our school. Everyone wanted to know her, everyone wanted to be a part of the tragedy. But not really; only in the shallowest sense and only until her moment ended. The room was a blabber of undiscernible nonsense,

“She was in my English class,”

“I think my mom knew her mom,”

“I bet her boyfriend broke up with her,”

This was not my first experience with death, or even with suicide, but this resonated differently. Perhaps because it wasn't a family member or a close friend's dad who had died like before, but rather a classmate who needed to be mourned, not only in private by her loved ones, but also by a student body who hardly knew her. It felt weird to try and honor her, having never met her face to face. I think others must have felt the same way too. But what about her friends that went to our school? For a week there were flyers printed with suicide hotlines, words of encouragement, and counseling center signup sheets. This was all so impersonal to me, where were Alexis's pictures, where was the assembly in her honor? After she died she disappeared from the school, at least temporarily. As the yearbook editor I was even told by administration not to dedicate a page to her in the yearbook. Everyone had decided it would be better if we pretended like Alexis had never existed. So, we carried on. I'm sure all her loved one's still cared and still honored her but the overall apathy of the school outweighed the grief.

Another morning, this time in an English class room. I had goosebumps as I sat under the A/C. Our teacher came in with tear tracks running across her cheeks. There is always something deeply unsettling to me about seeing an adult crying. We sat quietly, waiting until Ms. Marks was ready to begin class. Other teachers were somberly coming into the classroom and exchanging hugs. I could feel the stiff sadness in the air, I just didn't know its source. Once again, the intercom let out a brief static. The Bear's voice projected through the classroom.

“Early this morning we lost Coach Riley to a heart attack”,

The basketball coach turned psychology teacher never woke up on that March morning.

Immediately there were tears. Students, teachers, janitors. It was a school wide case of heart-ache. The mourning process for the 50-year Central teacher was much more substantial than Alexis's moment of silence and flyers. The funeral drew in hundreds of students, the hallways were plastered with his

pictures, a counselor sat in all his previous classes, the basketball season was dedicated to him. The administration asked the yearbook staff to dedicate an entire spread in the yearbook to Coach Riley.

Nobody protested, including myself, but all that was on my mind was Alexis. She still did not get even a single square inch while another death warranted an entire page. Her school photo was even removed, and her name deleted from the index. The entire disappearance of Alexis seemed wrong to me. When something so awful happens to a kid is it normal to just ignore it? Although I led the yearbook, and had a decent amount of power in choosing what content we printed, I felt that this issue was too 'adult' to question. I thought that we needed memorials for both Alexis and Coach Riley. But, The Bear said that we would only be encouraging suicide.

"If we print a memorial for an 'unnatural death' it will encourage that sort of thing, it will make other students feel that a positive reaction will follow if they do the same, they will get the recognition they crave" she told us in her nasally tone.

I thought it sent an even worse message though. I thought it said that we, Central High School, couldn't care less. We don't care about the shy, unknown, struggling kids. We don't care about the students who are only here for a few years, you only matter if you are here for 50. You only matter if you're loved by everyone. Everything tasted sour to me. But I let it go; apparently, I didn't care either because after a few weeks I wasn't even thinking about it anymore.

The school year went on and everyone else went on too. Homework piled up and yearbook deadlines came quicker and quicker. The anticipation of a 256-page yearbook being given out to 1,600 students and all their teachers built. That is a lot of eyes. All looking at the book that I had meticulously overseen the design of. The yearbook was what I spent nearly all my time on. I was the girl who yelled at people over picas and text alignment, but I loved it. I loved making something for the student body. I loved making something they loved. Something that commemorated the year, and paid homage to all that happened. Hopefully they would love it.

Yearbook handout day was frantic. It was the beginning of May, just getting hot and humid enough for a room packed full of teenagers to smell miserable. Everyone was talking at once, voices melding into static. I can distinguish bits and pieces of excited chatter,

“I’m in the book 4 times!”

“They misspelled my name,”

“This cover is so cool!”

By the end of the day, when everyone had their glossy new copy of the 2016 yearbook, I felt proud of myself and the staff I worked with. The 12 of us had accomplished a lot; it’s no small task to make a 200+ page book that looks exciting and includes every event and every person in our 1,600-person school. Almost all the feedback was positive.

Until it wasn’t. Around 7:30 the yearbook advisor called and told me I should check Facebook. I logged on, confused and nervous. What could be on Facebook that couldn’t wait until class tomorrow? What awaited me after the blue log-in screen still fills me with nerves. Outrage. Moms, dads, grandparents, friends, cousins all virtually expressing their rage.

Somebody had been left out.

Alexis didn’t have a memorial, or even a picture in the sophomore section, and it did not go unnoticed.

Hundreds of people had commented on a post made by Alexis’s mother. She had written that the school failed her family and, most of all, her daughter. We let her tragically die with no more than a minute of silence to give.

Was this my fault? Should I have fought The Bear to include her in the yearbook rather than wiping her from it? I’m not sure if anything I could have said would have made a difference. A 17-year-old versus an administrative board? Ultimately my opinion wouldn’t have mattered to them. I knew this,

but still, it felt like my fault that we had covered up the story of our classmates' death. I thought, isn't this telling everyone at the school that we don't care about them.

Following the Facebook posts, commenters seemed to be thinking the same thing as me. One stranger even pointed out,

“Coach Riley had an entire spread, eulogy, and memorial dedicated to him. Central cares, just not about everyone there.”

I read this, and I felt it was true. What would have happened if it was Alexis the cheerleader that had committed suicide? There is no way that it would be ignored in the same way Alexis the quiet girl that nobody knew was.

It shouldn't matter who you are or what your social status is. We should all matter the same amount, shouldn't we? What made Coach Riley, an old man, dying more heartbreaking than the death of Alexis, a young girl? The administration argued back that they only memorialize deaths from natural causes. This was only a half truth. In the past when students have died in car accidents it has been mourned properly. What they really meant is that we aren't going to talk about suicide. It's too taboo.

Isn't leaving it undiscussed and uncared about making the issue worse? Don't you think that the kids who are feeling so low they are considering harming themselves need to hear that people care? I think so. However, as I was shown, not everyone is always going to share the same views as me. I'm sure that student suicides have been swept under the rug by other institutions as well. I now have seen the aftermath of what an ignorance like this can do first hand. If I were ever in this situation again I would argue for Alexis. Even if I have no sway in the decision, I feel that it would mean something if even one more person had stood up for her.