When Words Can Kill: 'That's So Gay'
April 14, 2009
By SUSAN DONALDSON JAMES

Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover was 11-- hardly old enough to know his sexuality and yet distraught enough to hang himself last week after school bullies repeatedly called him "gay."

The Springfield, Mass., football player and Boy Scout was ruthlessly teased, despite his mother's pleas to the New Leadership Charter School to address the problem.

Sirdeaner L. Walker, 43, found Carl hanging by an extension cord on the second floor of the family's home April 6, just minutes before she was going to a meeting to confront school authorities again.

"I am brokenhearted," she told ABCNews.com. "We worry about the economy and about Iraq, but we need to be worried about our schools."

Walker, who works as a director of homeless programs, said Carl -- a slight child who loved his schoolwork -- had endured endless taunts since he started sixth grade in September.

School officials did not return numerous calls for comment from ABCNews.com.

The boy had been active in his church, taking communion on the recent Palm Sunday and playing a wise man in the Christmas play. He helped the needy and a black history program.

"That's the type of kid he was," Walker said. "You could rely and count on him."

Bullies Worse Than Breast Cancer

Walker said her son's 11-year-old tormentors were worse than the breast cancer she had survived four years ago.

In an ironic twist, the boy would have turned 12 on April 17 -- the same day students in thousands of schools across the country will participate in the annual Day of Silence to bring attention to anti-gay harassment in schools.
"There was no reason for the mother to believe he was gay," said Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network spokesman Daryl Presgraves. "It just happens he was someone his peers targeted, calling him, 'girlie,' ‘gay' and ‘fag.' According to the mother, it was a daily occurrence."

Middle School Suicides

Carl’s suicide comes about a year after California eighth-grader Lawrence King was shot and killed by a fellow student in his classroom for supposedly being gay.

In response, GLSEN has launched a multipronged education campaign to fight the use of anti-gay language and bullying.

Its annual Day of Silence, started at the University of Virginia in 1996 with 150 students, has now grown to more than 7,500 middle and high schools nationwide. Participants draw attention to LGBT issues by not speaking for a day.

Since October, GLSEN has aired thousands of public service messages, "Think Before You Speak," to reduce the use of the slur, "That's so gay."

"When you are in elementary school, one of the first things you learn is the feeling of hurt when you are called 'gay' or ‘fag,'” said Presgraves. "It doesn't matter if you are gay or straight. The term ‘gay’ has become synonymous with "uncool."

"The expression 'That's so gay' is one of the most heard in school, and students recognize it as derogatory," he said.

Lawsuit Against School for Anti-Gay Bullying

Just last week Bill and Janis Mohat filed suit against Ohio's Mentor High School, alleging their son, who, like Carl, did not identify himself as gay, shot himself after being tortured with homophobic slurs.

In a 2005 survey -- "From Teasing to Torment: School Climate in America" -- students said their peers were most often bullied because of their appearance, but the next top reason was because of actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender expression.

In that report, by the GLSEN and Harris Interactive, students said teachers rarely interfered in cases of gay-related bullying, either because they are embarrassed or don't know what to do.

"The truly unfortunate thing is because of the societal atmosphere surrounding gay and lesbian life in the U.S., administrators are reluctant to act or fail to act," said Eliza Byard, GLSEN's executive director, who attended Carl's memorial service.

"The key is absolute, direct, even-handed, no-nonsense approach to all aspects of bullying," she told ABCNews.com."At this cultural moment, homophobic language is the ultimate weapon. We have to address the use of that language like any other forms of name-calling and harassment."

The National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center estimated that nearly 30 percent of American youth are either a bully or a target of bullying.

In addition, researchers at the Yale School of Medicine, in a new review of studies from 13 countries, found signs of an apparent connection between bullying, being bullied and suicide.

GLSEN's own research indicates that LGB youth may be more likely to think about and attempt suicide than heterosexual teens.
According to a 2001 study published in the American Journal of Public Health, "The majority of the evidence is in favor of common causes for suicide that affect all youth, but which LGB youth are more likely than their heterosexual peers to experience."

Suicide rates among children Carl's age are very low, according to Ann Haas, director of the Suicide Prevention Project at the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, but they are anecdotally "creeping up."

"It's absolutely tragic," Haas said of Carl's suicide. "The really disturbing thing is the degree to which 'gay,' 'lesbian' and all pejorative terms are a cover for the bullying itself. The meaning of it is unclear."

**Bullies Render Kids Helpless**

"Anecdotal data is increasingly strong that bullying is a major factor in kids' lives," she told ABCNews.com. "The risk is very real and it underscores the fact that these kids are absolutely helpless in terms of having adults they can turn to and who can protect them."

"We need a much more institutional rather than individual approach," said Haas. "We need an across-the-board change in the way sexual orientation is integrated in the schools. This is not about teaching gay marriage. There are ways more subtle that the school can convey the basic dignity of all groups."

Gay students report that they are often scared to go to school because of the homophobic culture.

Such was the case with Conrad Honicker of Knoxville, Tenn., who came out as gay just before his freshman year in high school.

"Naturally, I got a lot of teasing, mostly verbal, but it got threatening at one point," Honicker told ABCNews.com. "Someone threw a large rock at me. They missed, but it landed in front of me."

He has survived verbal abuse that he described as "very graphic" and "like you would treat a woman in a bad, sexualized gratuitous way." Bullies also physically attacked him, "squeezing me and kissing my neck."

Honicker founded West High School's first gay-straight alliance, as well as eight other groups around the district. He believes these groups are a visible presence in schools that can thwart the bullying and encourage teachers to act.

"There's a little bit of pressure and demonstration that you are there raising awareness," said Honicker, who adds that he is lucky to have his parents' support.

"It alleviates the pressure," he said. "You are dealing with homophobia from all directions -- your teachers, your peers, your administration, your church or family."

For Carl Walker, whose short life was memorialized at a three-hour, standing-room only service on Monday, support came too late, but his mother hopes his story will help others.

"I am determined for the rest of my life to advocate on behalf of students who are voiceless and silent," she said.

"I have been homeless, but Carl and I made it through," said Walker. "I was a victim of domestic violence, and we made it through. The one thing we couldn't get through was public school."