

MSU – Katrina Tagget Fellowship 2011

First, I would like to thank you Mike Hudson, Ann Marie Lindley, Val Nilson and the rest of the RCPD staff for your support in establishing the Katrina Tagget Fellowship and the support you gave Katrina while she was a student at MSU.

The Katrina Tagget Fellowship is a fully endowed scholarship established in my daughter's memory to be a living legacy of Katrina. Katrina was an academically gifted student, achieving a 4.0 GPA in her major and 3.75 overall. This was an incredible feat given that she was dyslexic and ADHD which was not diagnosed until 4th grade. Once we identified her dyslexia, we were able to get her the right help, and she herself was committed to conquering this disability. We had truly hoped one or both of our children would want to go to MSU, and Katrina didn't disappoint, from the time she was a baby, she wanted to be a Spartan just like her parents. Besides academics, she was an incredible giving person, if you met her, it wouldn't take long for you to be in her address book and she would regularly call you just to see how you were doing. She was an RCPD mentor, she truly loved helping others that may not be able to do it alone. Katrina was to have graduated in May 2009.

So, on September 10, 2008, just 1 month of her being back at MSU for her final senior year, we got the call every parent dreads, "your child is dead". But if you can even comprehend that truth, what you don't expect is for them to next tell you she died by suicide. It's really not true when they say "you don't know what you don't know", it's more like "I didn't know what I needed to know ... about topics like mental illness, depression, and the link to drug and alcohol use." We just thought she was moody, "aren't most teenagers?" surely she would grow out of this. She binge drank like many college students. She was so highly functioning and a gifted young woman, how could someone like Katrina, with everything to live for, take her life?

But, here is what I have discovered. Depression knows no gender, no race, no ethnicity, nor no economic circumstances. 50% of college students report feeling so depressed they can't function. 1,100 college students die by suicide every year. One in four adults will suffer from a mental health disorder. We didn't have a clue she was at risk for suicide, because we thought she was highly functioning. She had this risky behavior, but she was going to class, earning good grades, had nice friends, was never in trouble with the law, and was planning for a future beyond college. Looking back, the signs were all there. After she died, I found a list of the 12 warning signs that a person is in crisis and at risk for suicide, she met 11 of the 12, the only one she didn't fit was "she was not filled with rage or seeking revenge". For Katrina, she was such a hard worker, almost a perfectionist, and had severe anxiety which then fueled a depression and put her at risk. She had trouble sleeping and had migraine headaches that knew no origin. And even though she told her friends of her struggle, to them this is "their normal", and they really didn't understand her risk for suicide either.

I share this personal story of Katrina because I think just as in life she helped others, so she continues after her death. We all thought Katrina was an incredibly strong person, but what she accomplished in her life while battling depression, she had unimaginable courage. The myth that talking about suicide encourages suicide is just that, a myth. , talking about suicide prevents suicide. I wish I had better understood Katrina's pain when she was alive, but hopefully, what we know now, and sharing that knowledge in memory of her and others that died by suicide will save lives that would have otherwise been lost had we not had the courage to speak up. So, I share her story, our story, to honor her, to do what she couldn't do when she was alive, and to let others know of the risk of suicide and that it can be stopped. That we can stop suicide when we start talking. Because talking takes away the shame, silence, and stigma of mental illness.

It was just three years ago, Katrina was standing here accepting a Samaritan award. RCPD was instrumental to her success at MSU, helping her become an advocate for herself. Marissa, you are the 2011 recipient of the Katrina Tagget Fellowship. The scholarship is awarded annually to a student who is a living representative of all that Katrina was and could be – strong academics, has a disability which impacts their learning, and has a focus on community service. This will be your second year as a Katrina Tagget Fellow. Courage and Perseverance are two words that define Katrina but they also define you. Thank you for all that you have done to become a Katrina Tagget Fellow and being a living legacy of our daughter. Keep doing what you are doing. Change the world. If you believe it you can!

Best of luck to you.