

## MSU - Katrina Tagget Fellowship 2016

Thank you for the privilege of speaking today. What the MSU Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities (RCPD) does for students with learning disabilities like our daughter Katrina is nothing short of amazing. From orientation onwards, the RCPD was extremely supportive of our daughter Katrina while she was a student at MSU.

I'd like to introduce you to Katrina. She was a vibrant, smart, and passionate young woman with blond curly hair, and a brilliant smile. She loved school, but her success was hard earned. Katrina was dyslexic and ADD. She couldn't read until the fourth grade and her ADD was not diagnosed until college. So, it was incredible she had achieved a 4.0 GPA in her major and an overall 3.74 GPA. RCPD was instrumental in her success at MSU.

In her own words from her personal statement for her application to MSU,

"As a child, I thought I was stupid. I couldn't read even a simple street sign. I memorized books according to the pictures on the page. I continue to have trouble remembering things. I have to really concentrate to read, and sometimes I have to read a paragraph several times to understand the meaning. I can read the same sentence several times without finding any grammatical errors, but someone else may find several errors. I am not dumb, and I am not lazy. I am dyslexic. I can't learn the way other kids learn. At seventeen, I am functioning well, but it has been a long struggle to get to where I am today."

No IEP, no 504. She worked at negotiating accommodations for her learning disability, class by class, teacher by teacher.

When she got to MSU, the RCPD was instrumental in helping level the playing ground for her. She became a mentor for RCPD, helping other students with disabilities navigate the challenges of college life. Katrina saw her dyslexia and ADD in a positive light, no longer a secret, she accepted her learning disabilities were part of what made her her. So, why then couldn't she see her mental illness was nothing to be ashamed of?

That's the big secret we will never know the answer to because on September 20, 2008, Katrina died by suicide. We just thought she was moody teen who would in time outgrow her moods. 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?

Suicide does not discriminate. Everyone is at risk of suicide. Ten important facts about suicide:

1. Of the one million people worldwide who die by suicide, 42,773 are Americans
2. Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death among 15-24 year olds.
3. About half of all suicide attempts in college are made by freshman.
4. Our veterans are dying by suicide at a rate of 22 veterans a day.
5. Firearms account for almost 50% of all suicides.
6. **The rate of suicide is highest in middle age – white men in particular**
7. 1 out of 4 Americans are struggling with some form of a mental illness at any given time.
8. 50% of college students report feeling so depressed they can't function.

9. It's a myth that talking about suicide encourages suicide.

10. 90% of those who die by suicide have a diagnosable and treatable mental health disorder

Suicide is a growing national problem that is not given the attention it deserves. Our family has learned the hard way that suicide is a reality. 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 kept her struggle to live secret from us, thinking irrationally that she was a burden to us and our lives would be better without her.

So, what can we do about this problem? If you think of mental illness like a cancer of the brain, it is much more understandable. Like cancer, mental illness can be properly diagnosed and properly treated, and left untreated or the wrong treatment, can be fatal.

The solution is really simple, talking saves lives. If you suspect someone is thinking about suicide, ask them straight up, "Are you thinking about suicide". Ask them to tell you what is going on and listen to their story. Get your local crisis center involved, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, or call 911 if you think suicide is imminent.

You can't put the idea of suicide in someone's mind, it's already there. But you can find out what is going on in their mind - many times they just need to know that someone cares. You don't need to be a mental health professional to help someone. You just need to be someone who can be there for someone who is struggling to live.

Katrina was a beautiful, smart, and kind young woman who gave us 21 years of memories, love, and joy. She enriched our lives more than she could ever understand - her depression and anxiety prevented her from seeing herself as we all saw her. We all thought Katrina was an incredibly strong person, because of her dyslexia but what she accomplished in her life while battling depression, she had unimaginable courage. She was a gift to us and all who knew her while she was alive and she is still a gift even in death. Because now she is helping us to be more aware of the risk of suicide - it is very very real. Her suicide was but one moment in an all too brief life, but it doesn't define her.

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.

Thank you all for allowing me to speak about Katrina. I will end my speech with a word to the Katrina Tagget Fellow 2016, Anna. The Katrina Tagget Fellowship is a fully endowed scholarship 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. Courage and Perseverance are two words that define Katrina but they also define you. I sent her off to college with a coffee mug that said, "Go confidently in the direction of your dreams, live the life you imagined" by Henry David Thoreau. Just as I hoped for Katrina to live her dreams, I now hope for you to live yours. Thank you for all that you have done to become a Katrina Tagget Fellow and being a living legacy of our daughter. Congratulations.