

Please Stop Laughing at Us ...

*One Survivor's Extraordinary Quest to
Prevent School Bullying*

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Introduction

So much has happened in the past few years. I wrote my memoir, *Please Stop Laughing at Me* . . . because, in the wake of all the school violence erupting across America, I decided it was time to go public with my story. I felt that too many people in this country didn't understand that kids shooting other kids wasn't about gun control, anger management, or any of the other politically correct catchphrases popping up in newspaper editorials and on afternoon talk shows. It was loneliness. I'm not talking about one lonely weekend spent pouting because the phone doesn't ring. The kind of loneliness I'm referring to is a much darker version, one that, sadly, has been afflicting kids long before any school shooting ever made the headlines. It's the desperate sadness of the outcast child, the kid who, no matter how hard he tries, just can't seem to fit in with his peers. The one who's simply "different." I know, because I *was* that kid. From fifth grade through the end of high school, I suffered from chronic loneliness, a state of heart that, believe me, can twist your head into a pretzel and your spirit into a dead, tangled mess.

I wrote my memoir because I wanted kids everywhere who were being bullied by their peers, who dreaded going to

school, who cried themselves to sleep night after night, who felt misunderstood by grown-ups and hated by classmates, to have a voice. I knew I was someone whom they could identify with, because I had been through it myself and survived. I also knew that I'd have credibility with their parents and teachers, because I was an adult with a successful career much like them. Secretly, I hoped that writing the book would be a catharsis, and help me overcome the residual insecurity and anger from those painful school years.

Writing *Please Stop Laughing at Me . . .* was the hardest challenge I ever undertook. On a professional level, confessing my past to the world and how that would affect my business was scary enough. I was a high-profile publicist whose job was to keep her famous clients in the limelight, not do anything that would put *her* in the public eye. Personally, the idea of stepping forward was even tougher. It was horrible reliving all those experiences: the name-calling, being spit on and kicked, the mean giggling behind my back, the physical threats, the fear; and even worse, the feeling of being invisible. I ended up having to see a therapist during the writing of the book, because I was having night sweats and bad dreams.

But something kept me going. It was as if there were hands on my back pushing me forward. Every time I felt like I couldn't finish a chapter, the courage to continue seemed to come from a place inside me that I never knew was there. So I persevered.

Five days after I delivered the manuscript to my publisher, it was my twentieth high school reunion. I was terrified to attend, since all those memories were so fresh in my mind. If

anyone ever tells you that one night can't change your life, you tell them that you have a friend named Jodee Blanco who says they're wrong. One night not only changed my life, but affected the lives of thousands of others.

Speaking of that night, I originally had a different last chapter. When I got back to my mom's house early the following morning I knew what I had to do or my heart would burst. At my high school reunion, I felt all the darkness inside me lift, and for the first time I could see my future and my purpose. It was as if I had been living in a tiny cave and had been there so long that I'd convinced myself that being cold, hungry, and alone was normal. Then, suddenly, someone with a giant flashlight illuminated the way out. In that moment, I learned that I didn't have to be in the blackness anymore, that I could come out now and help guide others to the same bright place of self-acceptance I had found. This miracle of freedom occurred on the one night that I thought would surely destroy me. I immediately sat down at the computer, deleted the original last chapter, and wrote the new one. My publisher had to pull my book out of production in order to accommodate the switch. That weekend transformed my memoir from a story of survival to a celebration of forgiveness.

The day *Please Stop Laughing at Me . . .* was published, President Bush declared war on Iraq. My publisher and my agent groaned, because they knew that books launched during a major international event fail. Indeed, every media appearance my publicist had scheduled for me was canceled. I was sick inside. How would my hopeful message reach the kids who needed it? Yes, I ached because we were at war, but what about all the wars being fought in the school hallways and locker rooms that only made the news if blood

was spilled? What about the kids who face another kind of battlefield every day, just navigating the safest way to get from homeroom to study hall without being wounded?

I *had* to write this book, and now it appeared as if my efforts were doomed. My mom had always told me that it's always darkest before the dawn. I used to get irritated every time she said that to me, but in this instance she was prophetic. Despite Iraq dominating every newscast and talk show, within forty-eight hours of my book's launch it appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list. I began receiving hundreds of e-mails and letters from kids and parents across the country, all thanking me for sharing my story and showing them that they, too, can survive. But the real kicker? Almost every person who wrote me mentioned the last chapter, and how it was the forgiveness that gave them hope. How ironic is *that*? Because the night that inspired that last chapter almost left me in my car in a parking lot, too terrified to face my classmates.

The night of my twentieth reunion was only the beginning. In the last few years, everything in my life has changed. Professionally, I gave up my PR firm working with Hollywood stars to embrace the new stars in my life: kids in crisis. I travel across the country, speaking at schools, helping students, teachers, families, and entire communities with bullying survival and prevention. I've been fortunate to be assisted by an extraordinary team of people whose passion and commitment to this issue encourage me every day. You'll be shocked, inspired, incensed, and amazed when you hear some of the stories from these schools.

I see the American school system from a perspective few

others do. I see the pain and frustration in teachers' eyes as they witness peer abuse, wanting to stop it but unsure of what to do. I meet principals who are dedicated, committed people who sacrifice so much to help students. I also come across administrators who are more concerned about a manicure appointment than they are about a student caught brandishing a razor. I see the best of our schools and the worst. I celebrate the hope that teachers, counselors, and administrators keep alive despite budget cuts, apathetic parents, and frustrated, angry kids. I am humbled by many of the people I meet on tour. They sacrifice to help kids. I am also infuriated by others who choose a career in education because it offers long vacations.

What's going on in our schools? What are we doing right? What are we doing wrong? Why are there people who don't even like kids being hired as teachers? How do you know if the superintendent in your district is a caring leader committed to his vocation or a political climber using your school district as his staircase to the top? When the large glass doors close and the first bell rings, signaling the beginning of a new school day, why do some children face peril and uncertainty while others sail through, coming home with smiles on their faces, good grades, and bright futures?

Have you ever been the parent seeking your school's help, only to be told after countless empty promises, "Well, there's nothing we can really do"? Or perhaps you've been the parent who's had the opposite experience. When you reach out to a teacher or an administrator on your child's behalf, they help with understanding and compassion, making sure your problem is resolved. How can you motivate that kind of

response from your school, and where can you turn if, no matter what you do, you face indifference?

If you're a student struggling with a serious peer-pressure issue or other challenge, how do you approach the school without fear of recrimination from your classmates or even from a teacher or counselor? How do you come clean with your parents about what is eating you up inside? Is there an escape from this condition called adolescence?

If you're a teacher, counselor, or administrator who wants nothing more than to empower kids, but you're confronting obstacles you *never* imagined, where can you seek assistance? What are your options? How do you hold on emotionally when you feel as if an entire system is working against you, when all you want to do is help a student in crisis? How do you communicate with a parent in denial, and temper the rage of a parent in fear? How much responsibility should you take on as an employee of the school district, and what do you do when you know that there isn't anyone else who's likely to fight for this student as you would?

I never thought I'd be sought after by tens of thousands of people as the expert who could answer these questions, let alone become a nationally recognized anti-bullying activist. I was now a survivor who was turning her pain into purpose, and none of it would have been possible if I hadn't gone public with my story. And it's not just peer-abuse victims and their teachers and families who reach out to me. Often, bullies come up to me after I've given a talk. The response from these kids can be overwhelming, their tears so affecting that I can hardly believe I have the opportunity to help them.

I cannot help but marvel at how exquisite life can be in its

unpredictability. I remember a time when I used to dread the unexpected. Now I relish it, because it was through the unexpected that my whole world turned around. Yes, I had an exciting career as a publicist, but I cried myself to sleep because I was empty inside. For some of us, change doesn't come gradually. It hits you like a tornado, completely rearranging your life. I went from the entertainment industry, a world where glitz and glamour are often camouflage for some of the darkest truths about human nature, to school gyms and lunchrooms, where those same dark truths exist, only in infant form. In some ways, the school arena and the Hollywood arena are not so different. Both are ruled by the power of the popular crowd. Both are teeming with betrayal of innocence, backstabbing, loneliness, and hurt. The difference is that with love, patience, and wisdom, the situation in our schools can improve. I doubt that the realities of the casting couch or the tabloids ever will.

I've been recounting professional changes. Now let me tell you about the personal changes. My mom is still in a state of delighted disbelief. As I said, I don't want to ruin the ending if you haven't read my memoir yet, but I will tell you this. Mitch and I are still together. The story of what has happened to my dreams of marriage and my hopes for a family make up the background to my new professional mission. I know that those of you who read my first book will be keeping your fingers crossed for me.

Since the release of my memoir, I've gone from a swinging single in silk business suits and high heels who attended movie premieres and Hollywood parties to a card-carrying member of Sam's Club and a part-time mom to two adorable girls, their two very large dogs, and a pair of French bunny

rabbits. I used to host champagne and caviar parties for heads of state. Now I host slumber parties, featuring such delicacies as peanut butter sandwiches (no crusts of course), blue push-up Popsicles, and Domino's cheese pizza. I used to escort Academy Award-winning actors to banquets in their honor. Now I cart kids to dance class, cheerleading practice, and poms. I also used to come home to emptiness. Now I come home to the love and comfort of family. Mitch, his daughters, the dogs, the bunnies—they're my anchors. Their love gives me the strength and the grounding I need to help save kids in crisis.

Sometimes, in quiet moments, Mitch or the kids will ask me if I miss my old life. My answer is always the same. *Never*.

And the bullies from school? Many of them are now my friends. It turns out that some of their children were getting bullied at school and they asked me to help. I did, and the result was unlikely friendship. The very people who made me run as far away from my hometown as possible twenty-two years ago are now the people who convinced me to move back. As my favorite movie character, Dorothy, in *The Wizard of Oz* realized when she woke up after the tornado, I discovered that "there's no place like home."

Now that you know how my life has changed, let me tell you a little about the book you're about to read. When *Please Stop Laughing at Me . . .* came out, I received so many wonderful letters that I've put some of them in this book. I'm always touched when someone takes the time to communicate with me, and I try to respond to each and every correspondence. I noticed over the last two years that the same questions keep coming up. Parents and teachers want practical advice on how

to prevent bullying, how to help both the victim and the bully, and what schools can do to curb the problem. My teen readers want advice, too, but they're also curious about my personal life. "Are you still with Mitch?" they ask. Are we getting married? Do I ever talk to any of the famous actors and athletes I used to work with? And adult survivors, who endured peer abuse like me when they were young, want to know how they can overcome the residual pain and insecurity from those lonely school years.

I decided that this new book should pick up where the first one left off. It's time to offer solutions. I've been on the road learning the inner workings of the American school system. From wealthy suburbs and rural communities to small towns and major cities, I've held the hands of thousands of hurting kids and listened as they poured their hearts out, entrusting me with knowledge that I know can help you. Teachers, counselors, and administrators have opened up to me with their valuable insights. Adult survivors have confided their deepest fears in me. I'm going to share all this with you, because you must remember, whether you're a kid who's lonely and frustrated, a teacher, counselor, or administrator at your wit's end, a worried parent, or a survivor still haunted by the past, you are not alone. I am here with you, just as I was before, when you read my memoir. The only difference is, now we're joined by so many others from all across the United States. We're a force to be reckoned with, a community of courageous individuals whose wounds have made us stronger, smarter, and ready to end the plague of peer abuse. By now, you probably know that I don't hold anything back when I write. All my windows are open. I'm going to tell you all

Introduction

about my personal life, too. Because all of us are a combination of elements — we are an embodiment of the people we love and those who love us, the jobs we perform, the children we raise, and the lives we touch and who touch us. For those of you who read *Please Stop Laughing at Me . . .*, welcome back. I'm honored to spend quality time with you again. For those of you who are just finding me now, it's a privilege to meet you.

It's time to stand up and be heard. Please, won't you join us?