



'Act of hope' by teens inspires bullying victim to stand strong

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When Olivia Gardner suffered an epileptic seizure in front of her northern California classmates, an unrelenting torrent of taunting and cyberbullying ensued, culminating in the creation of an "Olivia Haters" website and bracelets.

The 14-year-old girl became withdrawn, severely depressed and contemplated suicide. Her desperate parents transferred her to two other schools to no avail, then home-schooled her.

Then Olivia's local newspaper ran a story detailing her torment. It was read by Emily and Sarah Buder, two teenage sisters from a neighbouring town. Deeply moved by the account, they began a letter-writing campaign to inspire Olivia to be strong.

Now a portion of the collection of nearly 4,000 heartfelt letters -- from supporters, the bullied and bullies alike around the world -- has been published in a new book, *Letters to a Bullied Girl: Messages of Healing and Hope* (HarperCollins, \$16.25).

"We were horrified and shocked at how cruel and relentless these bullies were," Emily and Sarah write in an authors' note. "After reading all the disturbing details of what happened to Olivia, and noticing how lonely and depressed she looked in the newspaper photo, we felt compelled to do something to lift her spirits."

The letters prompted by the girls' campaign range from confessional to apologetic. All are deeply emotional, offering words of support and comfort while relating past experiences with bullies, witnessing bullying or actively bullying someone else.

The book's foreword was written by Barbara Coloroso, a bullying expert and author of *The Bully*, *The Bullied* and *The Bystander*.

"Being afraid and not knowing how to help are legitimate reasons kids give for not taking a stand against bullying," Coloroso writes. "But the cycle of violence can be interrupted when even one person has the moral strength and courage to resist a bully, defend those who are targeted, or give witness to the cruelty in order to get it stopped."

"Emily and Sarah began a letter-writing campaign that in itself was an act of hope because, by doing so, they were saying that there is an alternative to mean and cruel behaviour."

Today, Olivia's story continues, filled with hope, friendship and renewed strength as she moves forward. Along with the Buder sisters, she is a co-author of the book.

Perhaps the book's most poignant pages are those that remind of the most tragic consequences of bullying -- a note by the mother of Corinne, 13, who committed suicide after being bullied for months by her peers.

"We cannot underestimate the importance of these letters to a current, former or future target of bullying and to the bullies themselves," Corinne's mother writes.

"I truly believe that if other classmates or children her age had shown her kindness and compassion, my daughter would not have felt so alone and desperate and would

still be here today."

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