

## Every voice - and letter - counts in the battle against bullies

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Funny about Michael Phelps. I know the story is all the swimmer's Olympic gold medals - more than anyone in the history of the Games - but I look at him and see the boy who was bullied because he had a lip and his ears stuck out.

The bullying "made him be stronger and work harder," his mother has said, and his is, arguably, a story of triumph over adversity - one that included attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and an absentee father.

He had to contend with kids flicking his big ears, mocking his gangly form and throwing his baseball cap out the school bus window, I read in media reports; he has spoken of the "deep hurt" engendered by the actions.

Stories about bullying always make my stomach flip-flop: it's not that I was bullied in any overt way or ever bullied anyone, not consciously, anyway. But there is something so raw and so primal about the experience that just hearing of it is painful.

Bullying is personal, I believe, even when it doesn't affect you personally.

For Olivia Gardner, it began when she was in Grade 6, with name-calling, after the northern California teen had an epileptic seizure in front of fellow students. The bullying continued for more than two years - and three schools.

Olivia was singled out as different. She was tormented, relentlessly, in hallways, and badmouthed and humiliated online when her classmates created an "Olivia's Haters" website on MySpace. Terrifying as it is to be bullied, there was a time one could escape: now they find you in cyberspace.

Her bullies taunted her and wore "I Hate Olivia" bracelets. So deep was her despair that she thought of taking her own life.

Her story made it to a local newspaper and, in March of last year, two teenage sisters from a neighbouring town, Emily and Sarah Buder, read about her plight - and started a campaign in which they encouraged schoolmates to write letters of hope and encouragement to help boost Olivia's spirits. Olivia's Letters, they called it. "We also wanted her to know that she was not alone," they said.

Media attention helped word spread and, ultimately, 4,000 letters and emails were written and sent from all over the world - by children and adults, by those who had bullied and been bullied, by those who had overcome their ordeal and those who still bear scars.

Olivia is 15 now, and back in school after being home-schooled for a time. Although memories of her trials are with her still, she has new, caring friends. The letters addressed to her speak to anyone who has been affected by bullying.

Olivia shares some of the most revealing in the just-published Letters to a Bullied Girl: Messages of Healing and Hope (HarperCollins, \$16.25). Sure, some are predictable and treacly, but others, particularly those from people who recall details of being bullied 40 and 50 years after the fact, are affecting, even gut-wrenching. I read the 200-page book in a sitting.

Cheryl, now 61, wrote: "I can still vividly remember the horrible abuse and bullying I received throughout my school years." Taunted for her thinness and her crooked teeth, she suffered from recurring bouts of depression. "I blame it on the fact that I was conditioned to depression because of the abuse I endured as a child."

Caren, punched and ostracized in elementary school, wrote at 53: "Kids are bullied for a thousand reasons, none of them valid ... Do not give the bullies the satisfaction of turning you into a mean and spiteful person. At some point, some of them will regret the way they treated you."

And yet, some of the letters from former bullies sounded oddly detached - perhaps because this was the first time they were sharing their stories.

Pam "wasn't the victim, I was the victimizer ... the one who, unfortunately, enjoyed making fun of and taunting my schoolmates. And I am extremely sorry for what I put people through."

As a skinny and self-conscious 12-year-old with asthma, Jessica "endured many taunts and lots of comments ... about my body. ... somewhere in my self-loathing I turned on a friend and verbally abused her and convinced others to taunt her, too." The two reconciled, she writes, "but not a year goes by that I don't think of that and feel ashamed."

Starting the letter campaign was an act of hope, bullying authority Barbara Coloroso observes in the book's foreword. Emily and Sarah Buder have shown that there is an alternative to cruel behaviour, that bullying is a nefarious and all-too-common practice with lasting effects, and that it needs to end.

Suzanne Shulman, program director of the Canadian Leave Out Violence program, said the two young women exemplify the impact one can have by speaking up. Because of them, "Olivia Gardner is not alone but surrounded by a sea of voices," she said - reminding us that each of us can make a difference.

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