

To my classmates of Fort Lee High, Class of '66.

My name is George Mundorf. I would assume the majority of you don't know me. In my four years at Fort Lee High, I tried not to make waves, to blend into the woodwork and to be invisible. You see, for four years I was bullied.

I was not alone. I saw two of our classmates constantly taunted in the gym by fellow classmates...and the gym teacher. Their crime? Being socially inept and having acute acne and bad teeth. I have no idea if they were homosexual or not. Their (figuratively) clinging to each other might have been out of sheer desperation. I am ashamed to this day that I did not shout out, even once, "Will you just leave them alone."

Another of our classmates who was innocuous but obese and obviously unable to defend himself, was beaten up in our Earth Science class. He was punched about the face so badly he was out of school for weeks.

Harassment and humiliation can take many forms. One boy in our class was impoverished. Nothing would do but that one of the guys at my lunch table (more about him later) had a bunch of us walk over to the boy's house and look on as he spent some time laughing and pointing out the shoddiness of the house - it certainly did not meet his standards of quality living. The boy's mother was home, heard his taunts, and came out and asked why he was making fun of her house. I felt her humiliation.

The bullying to me ran the gamut, from harassment "lite" (one girl in my Spanish class said, "Here comes George, he's just one of the girls") to heavy duty. I sat at a lunch table in the cafeteria with four other boys, and every day two of them would remind me that my masculinity did not meet some macho norm. It was a personal nightmare. I always prayed they might refrain from calling me a queer on Fridays, as my whole weekend would be ruined. For years I thought one of the boys - the same one above who humiliated a classmate's mother - was just plain evil. In retrospect I see he was an ignorant adolescent who got his pleasure from other's pain. The other boy, however, was a hate-filled homophobe. At lunch one day he took an apple and pounded it on my head as he shouted "faggot - faggot - faggot." I thought he had gone out of his mind.

So you might ask, what in the world were you doing that deserved this treatment? Believe me, one who is trying to blend into the wallpaper is not a flamboyant, raging queen. Let me make it clear - I did not come on to them, I did not touch them, and, as a matter of fact, I was such an innocent that I didn't know that I wasn't straight! Strange but true.

My sin - I think - was that "I carried my books like a girl."clutching them to my chest, instead of the proper, macho, approved way; carrying them at my side. I also was lousy at sports, didn't know how to fight, was in the marching band, and got good grades. By themselves, those latter four would have raised me up socially one notch, to a nerd. If I only carried those damn books correctly...

So the homophobe's Gaydar caught my vibes and I was labeled a big homo. And (surprise to me, if to nobody else) it was working properly! I *am* gay. Apparently the remaining two fellows at the table did not set off his Gaydar - sadly they are both long dead from drug overdoses.

The pinnacle of my harassment occurred at one of the class meetings. I was nominated for the prom decorating committee (and, let's face it, I would have been a good decorator, right?) Miss DiCamillo said, "Who seconds the nomination?" Silence. Then from the class: "Who? He's a fag! Boo! Faggot!" Could it get worse? Oh yes. Miss DiCamillo did not hear whose name was nominated. So I had to go through the humiliation a second time - but now with laughs thrown in and a few "Queer" shout outs. Can you imagine being seventeen and realizing you did not have a single friend? I can understand some of my acquaintances shying away from seconding my nomination for fear of associating themselves with a loser - some of that contamination just might rub off on them. However, I never understood some of my "friends" who were "above suspicion" and could have stood up for me against the majority - the class sports star who I helped in English class, the gal who I made posters for when she was running for office, the girls I dated. The truth is - I almost committed suicide on the way home from school that day.

I won a couple of scholastic awards and would be receiving them at a senior assembly near the end of the year. All teachers were invited - including my mother, who was one of the school librarians. Instead of looking forward to going on stage to accept the prizes, I was in absolute terror that someone would shout out some disparaging remark in front of my mother. For once it did not occur. But living in fear is a terrible thing.

So by now you're probably saying to yourself, "My God, that all happened 45 years ago, get over it. Go to a psychiatrist and move on." Well, I did, I have, and as the song goes, "I'm here". There is a point to this letter.

In recent months there have been many teenage suicides due to bullying and harassment. Celebrities have made ads to stop bullying and to give advice to the tormented teens. Though I'm no celebrity, I decided to do my part on a more local level. I would ask you to reach out to someone you suspect is being bullied. Perhaps a grandchild, a niece, a cousin. If you notice a child who is "different" from the prevalent social crowd, he or she just might be being bullied. The obvious, of course, is having a different skin color, a different religion, a physical deformity.

But other differences bring on harassment too: being too short, too shy, bad at sports, having learning or speech disabilities, having a face or body that doesn't meet today's "beauty standards", having a fondness for gender "inappropriate" toys or games. Maybe she's too overdeveloped, or underdeveloped. Maybe his apparel is different: out of choice, for religious reasons. out of financial necessity. The reasons are innumerable.

I would ask you to try and find out if the child is being bullied - it won't be easy as the child will be ashamed. And unfortunately you probably will not be able to stop the bullying. Do not lie to the child - "Oh you're beautiful just the way you are!" Or "Your weight is just right." No matter how good the intentions, the child will realize you're just being nice, and you will be put into the group that "just does not understand." Your credibility will be lost. Nor should you say things like, "Oh you're going through the 'duckling' development period, soon you'll be a swan." Or "This is just a stage, soon you'll be just like everyone else". Or the worst: "You're beautiful inside, where it really counts." That is no help for the here and now. Instead, acknowledge the problem. Say, "Yes, you're going through a hard time now. It is very difficult for you and I understand." Knowing they have a friend who understands is a big help. If a "problem" cannot be changed - such as sexual preference - it is important that the child knows that **THINGS WILL GET BETTER. HANG IN THERE** - and when you're older, you can go to a big university or move to a large city, where you will meet like-minded people or people who like you for just the way you are. **DO NOT GIVE UP. DO NOT LET THEM WIN.** I repeat: **THINGS WILL GET BETTER.**

I know.

George Mundorf- New York City