

Being Mean is Never in Fashion

Outgrowing childhood bullying is harder than it looks.

By DONNA LYNN RHODES (Open Post)

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It was 43 years ago but it could have been 43 hours ago – that’s how clearly I remember it.

I was 13 years old and saved my babysitting money for months to buy a leather-like jumper from Saks Fifth Avenue in Old Orchard. It was \$12 and the most expensive piece of clothing I had ever owned and the first (and the last) item I ever bought from Saks. My parents bought me a black leather hat to go with it. I felt like a model.

The seven of us -- my mom, dad, older brother and grandparents -- piled in the Chevy to go to my aunt and uncle’s house on the north side of Chicago for Sunday dinner. I was so

excited to show off my new outfit and decided that everyone else should go inside first so I could “make an entrance.”

“Ta Da!” I said as I walked in and posed. My Auntie Annie and Auntie Sadie’s face lit up. My Uncle Robert looked at me and said, “Hello Fatso.”

I was a size 6.

Fat, ugly and stupid were my childhood nicknames. Being bullied through grade school still haunts me today.

I was a terrible student and had a very difficult time reading. Mind you, this was in the 1960s and looking back, I am sure I was dyslexic. I remember in my 5th grade English class, our teacher would ask the class for volunteers to read aloud. I always looked away and tried to make myself invisible but Paula Carlin would yell out, “Let Donna read, let Donna read.” I would stand up and start reading and, of course, would blow it and the whole class would roar with laughter.

I hated every single day of grade school. Some days were worse than others, and I would spend much of the day hiding in a bathroom stall crying. Except for art, music and PE, I was a straight-D student. I was one of the best athletes but was the last to be chosen. And all my singing and dancing never earned me a solo, or a speaking part in any production. I wasn’t good enough. The other kids called me dumb. They made fun of everything I wore and everything I did. From first grade through sixth grade, I had two best friends -- Lynn Irving and rejection. I developed a thick skin and comedic timing – and have been hiding behind them ever since.

Except for a random act of mean girls, the name calling and bullying stopped when I got to junior high. I made some wonderful new friends and I was actually starting to feel better about myself. My grades went from Ds to Cs. And at 4-feet 11 inches, I tried to stand tall. For many kids, high school is when the real bullying starts, but for me I got along with everyone -- the starlets, the stoners, the jocks and the janitors. When faced with adversity, I relied on my sense of humor or just tap-danced my way through. By college, I was downright popular and had enough confidence and credentials to graduate on the Dean’s List.

For the last 35 years I have made a career out of public speaking but all too often am still hiding behind the shadow of that bullied little girl. I still fear rejection. When faced with it, I find myself in many a bathroom crying.

Which brings me back to my uncle calling me Fatso.

Somehow, I had the strength and support to pull through but not everyone does. It’s no coincidence that concerns about bullying and suicides are on the rise. And while Michelle

Obama and Kurt Hummel of Glee can talk about the effects of bullying all they want, bullying won't stop until we stop it.

My ongoing feelings of failure and the raw memories of being bullied have at times pushed me into sadness and despair. It's not surprising that news of local teens in crisis or committing suicide profoundly affects me. I think I understand the demons of pain and loneliness these dear souls may have been feeling.

Every time I hear about another teen jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge or an adult taking their own life, I wonder what their uncle called them. Or if the people they work with, or for, bully them. Yes, sadly, adults bully too -- especially those who are in powerful positions. Maybe it makes them feel better about themselves to intentionally hurt or frighten someone who is smaller in stature or role than they are.

School bullies often hit, kick or push people; adult bullies enjoy threatening, teasing, scaring and judging. So the next time you want to talk about someone, behind their back or to their face -- call them fat, stupid, ugly, queer, a loser, a retard or any racial slur -- don't.

From where I'm standing, you're either being bullied or you are the bully.

I think it's time we all say uncle.