



A life cut short by suicide casts a long shadow

By: Bella English

TAUNTON, Mass. — When they heard the CD skipping over and over from Justine's room on that sunny September Saturday, Mike and Mara Phillips assumed the girl had snuck out of the house while they were off on a bike ride. Justine had been grounded for slipping out at night and meeting friends while her father and stepmother slept.

Mike opened the door to his daughter's room, shut off the boom box, and said, "Yep, she took off again."

Then he saw her. She was hanging by a scarf in her closet.

Screaming her name, Mike frantically hoisted his petite daughter. Mara, his wife of a year and a half and a former EMT, ran for scissors to cut Justine down, then tried in vain to revive her.

Justine Phillips was 14 years old when she took her own life in her bedroom. She loved cheesecake and chocolate, hip-hop and Spanish music.

A few days earlier Justine had enrolled as a freshman at Taunton High School. In middle school she was a cheerleader and won several trophies in talent and modeling contests, including one for "best smile." She'd landed a couple of modeling jobs, posing for a math textbook and making a commercial for BJ's Wholesale Club. With a black mother and a white father, she had a biracial look that fit a certain marketing niche.

But the last time her photo was published was with a story in a local weekly newspaper headlined "Pretty, popular 14-year-old ends her pain in suicide."

"On the outside, everything looked good," says her father. "She was a cheerleader, a model, had lots of friends. But on the inside she was torn apart."

Every year 1,600 teenagers kill themselves. Experts say suicide generally doesn't result from a particular incident, such as the breakup of a relationship, but is a complex phenomenon with many causes. "This is a common and I would say a major public health problem," says psychologist **Carol Glod**, a professor at Northeastern University and director of developmental studies at **McLean Hospital** in Belmont. "We do eye and ear screening, but we don't necessarily do a depression or suicide screening."

In the case of Justine Phillips, a combination of biochemistry and a shaky start in life proved lethal. Though her father tried his best to do the right thing — sticking by her, setting limits, getting her the help she needed — it was not enough.

Mike Phillips sought help from the state Department of Social Services, which placed the girl in a foster home and then a residential program in June. "I felt she needed to be put somewhere on 2-4/7 watch," says Mike, who visited her every day. Justine chafed at the restrictions and begged to come home. When she did, in July, things were fine for a while. "Then it would happen again," her father says. "She would do the disappearing act with the boyfriend."

Martin Kenney, the Attleboro area director for DSS, says it made sense to send Justine home at the end of her evaluation. "That's part of the problem we run into with residential programs," he says. "We tend to lock kids up, and that's not the answer." When she was released, DSS assigned a "tracker" to check in on her periodically, unannounced.

"All the services were in place. Everything was being done," says Kenney. "From everything I've heard, they — Mike and Mara — did everything they could."

But the questions remain in her father's mind: What could he have done differently? Was it the medication she was on, or the fact she had recently stopped taking it? What if her therapist hadn't canceled several appointments? Did grounding her contribute? What if the DSS hot line had responded after his frantic call that final day?

Justine's story illustrates just how difficult it can be to help a depressed teen who is intent on taking her own life. Three months after she died, Mike Phillips wonders what more he or anyone else could have done.

A troubled family history

Justine Phillips was unlucky from the start. She was born to substance-abusing parents whose childhoods had been plagued with problems. Justine's mother was 17, pregnant, and in foster care when she met Mike. She was also an alcoholic, and the father of her unborn baby had taken off. (The Globe was unable to reach Justine's mother for this story, after leaving messages on her phone, and is not publishing her name.) Mike's parents divorced when he was young, and his father, an alcoholic, died when he was 16.

Mike was 22 when he began to date the teenager. They soon moved in together. When her baby was born, he was named Jordan. Although the boy was not his son, Mike says he felt as if he were. A year and a half later, his girlfriend gave birth to a girl, Justine. But soon they began a downward spiral of drinking and drugging that would land them in jail and the children in foster care.

"We were neglectful because we were too busy doing drugs when we should have been taking care of the kids," Mike says. "When the kids were young, things were definitely chaotic." He was sent to the Dartmouth House of Correction for 10 months for stealing to support his drug habit; the children's mother went to prison for nearly three years for robbery.

Upon his release, Mike lived in a halfway house. The state Department of Social Services, which had custody of the children, would bring them to see him weekly. Slowly he was working his way back into their lives. He got his driver's license, found a job, and began attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings.

"The kids were the motivating factor for me getting my life together," says Mike, who is now 36. He got an apartment. He took parenting classes. He stayed sober, and has been for 11 years. In 1994 he was granted custody of Justine and Jordan, who were 4 and 5. He was 25. "In the beginning, it was difficult, because I was just learning how to take care of myself. I was young and inexperienced. I had to work full time to pay the bills, and I had to go to 1/8AA3/8 meetings for my own recovery. But as a dad, I think I did the best I could."

Their mother was in and out of their lives. "She would start visits, then she would drink and drug again and disappear," he says. "There were a lot of trust and abandonment issues, a lot of pain in their hearts." Jordan, now 16, says he did not know how to reach his mother for two months after Justine's funeral.

Warning signs

Justine's death did not come out of the blue.

A year ago she swallowed a small amount of bleach. No one thought it was a serious suicide attempt as much as a cry for help. She was put on an antidepressant and sent to both individual and family therapy.

Both children had anger issues. Justine was transferred to another school after fighting with a girl. Two years ago Jordan went to live with a great-aunt because he no longer wanted to obey the rules. Justine began to steal. After her father married Mara Spurgin in July 2004, Mara discovered jewelry, socks, and makeup missing. "We had to put a lock on our bedroom door," says Mara, who is 30. When they caught Justine shoplifting a bathing suit, her father made her return it. The store manager let her off with a lecture. When she got caught at another store, she was charged with theft, put on probation, and fined \$250.

What most worried her father was her sneaking out of their apartment at night, often to meet a boyfriend. Concerned, Mike took out a CHINS petition in court, which meant he had a Child in Need of Supervision. DSS took over legal custody and provided services, though Mike retained physical custody.

A year ago Justine's mother moved to North Carolina, where she was in occasional phone contact with her children. More often than not, the kids could not reach her. They'd leave a message, and she wouldn't call back.

"Justine said she missed her mom, that she would try to call her but she didn't get her," says LaTasha Santos, one of Justine's best friends. LaTasha has turned her bedroom into a sort of Justine shrine, with photos and poems and a banner hanging outside her window: "R.I.P. Justine." "Her father was good to her," says LaTasha, who along with several of Justine's other friends call Mike Phillips "Dad."

LaTasha's mother, Yvette Garcia, agrees that Mike was a good father. "He was at everything she was involved in," she says.

But there was a disturbing side of Justine, says LaTasha. Justine would call her friends and say she felt like hurting herself, only to be talked out of it. "But that day," LaTasha says, "she didn't call."

Final days

A week before she died, Justine wrote a long letter to Mike and Mara in which she asked for "just one more chance" and promised not to leave the house without permission. The unpunctuated letter is a rambling plea for help: "I just need you & Mara's help to get through this hard time for us from now on I will turn to God instead of stealing sneaking around and doing everything else that is bad for me I will let you know where I am every minute of the day and you will know who I am with and if you don't agree with me being there I will not catch an attitude and get mad at you ... I just want to apologize to you for putting you through hell in the last year or so but I'm a wreck and I have reach my point where I can't stand being like this anymore so please let's just start over and have a fresh start and try to go on with our lives. I love you both always love, Justine."

Neither Mike nor Mara saw it as a suicide letter. But they knew she sometimes felt depressed. She would come home from school and climb into bed with the music playing. On weekends she would sleep much of the day.

On Saturday, Sept. 3, they didn't think much of it when Justine slept through the morning. She was still grounded and wasn't happy about it. Still, Mike went into her room and rubbed her forehead as she slept, making sure she was feeling OK. Their argument had upset both of them, and the next day they had apologized to each other.

But there was something else. Mike and Mara had discovered a bag containing pills that Justine was supposed to be taking for depression and anger. They don't believe she was stockpiling the pills to hurt herself; often Justine would claim she didn't need to be on meds. They hadn't confronted her with the pills yet, because they were trying to figure out the next step. Today the Phillipses believe Justine's abrupt withdrawal from the medications could have triggered a deep depression that led to her suicide.

Around noon that last day, Mara took ice cream up to Justine. The television was on, and she was listening to music. At 2 p.m. Mike called the DSS hot line; he was worried and felt Justine needed to be in a structured setting where she would take her medications. He wanted DSS to come get her and put her back in the residential program. The hot line worker said someone would get back to them within an hour. No one did.

At 4 p.m. Justine came downstairs and got some juice. At 5 p.m. the couple decided to go for a bike ride; Mara knocked on Justine's door to see if she wanted to join them. She got no answer and figured Justine had fallen asleep. They left her a note, telling her where they were going. At 7 p.m. Mara went upstairs to check on Justine. When she heard the CD skipping, she called Mike.

What now?

DSS, which had failed to return Mike's hot line call, showed up at 10:30 that night, after learning of the suicide from police. DSS Commissioner Harry Spence attended the wake and vowed an investigation into the hot line error. Justine's psychiatrist — who had canceled her last four sessions — called with condolences.

Mike Phillips had to borrow \$7,000 to pay for the funeral. Justine's mother, he says, showed up at the service smelling of alcohol.

Jordan had moved back in over the summer with Mike and Mara, but he was away that final weekend. "I was heartbroken when she died, because she left me all to myself," Jordan says. Every day during the month before Justine died, the teens called their mother to say hi. They left messages but never reached her, says Jordan.

At the funeral, Justine's mother took pictures of her in the casket. "She was wickered upset, and she went to the car and had a beer," Jordan says. "When Justine died, she came back into the picture a little more, because she doesn't want me doing the same thing." But she recently moved, he says, and now he doesn't know how to reach her.

In the hindsight of their grief, Mike and Mara Phillips say they wish they had intruded a little more into Justine's isolation that weekend. They wish the DSS hot line had returned their call. But they were polite when Spence and another DSS official visited them a couple of months after the death. Spence told the couple that the supervisor on call that day has been disciplined and that new procedures have been enacted. In addition, DSS is paying for Justine's gravestone.

After Justine's death, the couple never spent another night in the apartment; they have moved to a smaller unit. They are in grief counseling. Mike, a mental health assistant at a detox center in Foxborough, hopes to become an alcohol and addiction counselor. Mara had been working nights as a mental health aide at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Boston but recently left the job.

"I just couldn't do it after Justine took her life," she says.

She is now studying nursing at Massasoit Community College.

On Nov. 13, the day that would have been Justine's 15th birthday, the couple invited her friends to the community center at their apartment complex. There were photo collages and a photo cake with pink and white icing, in which Justine is smiling widely. "Rest Peacefully, Baby Girl," was the squiggly message. Everyone watched tapes of Justine's cheerleading team and her middle school graduation. There were tears and laughter.

Justine, sounding much younger than her 14 years, still delivers the message on the family's answering machine. "Hi ... We can't get the phone right now, so please leave your name, number and a brief message. God bless."

Mike will not remove the message. "It's the only way I can hear her voice," he says.

How parents can help

Though parents are often afraid to talk about suicide with their children, it is imperative that they do so if they are concerned, says Carol Glod, a psychologist who teaches at Northeastern University and works at McLean Hospital.

"Parents think if they don't ask, things will be fine, and if they do, they'll plant the idea," she says. "The real truth is, if you ask and you find out, then you can do something about it."

Julie Totten of Families for Depression Awareness, a nonprofit group in Waltham, says the following signs should alert parents:

A depressed mood, including irritability, that lasts at least two weeks.

Decreased interest in people and activities.

Writing about death or giving away favorite possessions.

Preoccupation with songs about death and dying.

Weight loss or eating disorders.

Sleeping too much or too little.

Low self esteem.

Poor school performance.

Totten, whose brother committed suicide 15 years ago, stresses that parents need to be actively involved in a child's therapy and medications. "The person can't think straight, can't function. You have to go with them and tell the doctor the symptoms, and then you have to monitor the treatment. It's not a clear and straight path to wellness."