

The Atlantic **The Silicon Valley Suicides**

Why are so many kids with bright prospects killing themselves in Palo Alto?



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The air shrieks, and life stops. First, from far away, comes a high whine like angry insects swarming, and then a trampling, like a herd moving through. The kids on their bikes who pass by the Caltrain crossing are eager to get home from school, but they know the drill. Brake. Wait for the train to pass. Five cars, double-decker,

tearing past at 50 miles an hour. Too fast to see the faces of the Silicon Valley commuters on board, only a long silver thing with black teeth. A Caltrain coming into a station slows, invites you in. But a Caltrain at a crossing registers more like an ambulance, warning you fiercely out of its way.

The kids wait until the passing train forces a gust you can feel on your skin. The alarms ring and the red lights flash for a few seconds more, just in case. Then the gate lifts up, signaling that it's safe to cross. All at once life revives: a rush of bikes, skateboards, helmets, backpacks, basketball shorts, boisterous conversation. "Ew, how old is that gum?" "The quiz is next week, dipshit." On the road, a minivan makes a left a little too fast—nothing ominous, just a mom late for pickup. The air is again still, like it usually is in spring in Palo Alto. A woodpecker does its work nearby. A bee goes in search of jasmine, stinging no one.

In many parts of town, you can hear the warning of a passing train just about everywhere: the quad at Palo Alto High School; the tables at Piazza's grocery store, where kids from Gunn High School hang out after school; the kids' bedrooms after midnight.

A FEW STUDENTS had gotten in early to take some photos dressed as *Scooby-Doo* characters, part of an annual volleyball-team tradition. Now one of them, Alyssa See-Tho, was waiting outside the choir room for first period to start. Slowly, classmates began to join her. Through the windows, they could spy the teachers packed in there. In the other classrooms of Henry M. Gunn High School, about 1,900 kids waited. After a few minutes the teachers filed out, each holding a sheet of paper, none talking. Alyssa took her seat inside. It was November 4, 2014, a few days after homecoming and maybe a month before college applications would start making everyone crazy. The teacher read a statement containing the words *took his own life last night*, and then a name, Cameron Lee. Alyssa's first thought: *Is there another Cameron Lee at our school?*, because the one she knew was popular and athletic

and seemingly unbothered by schoolwork, an avid practitioner of the annoying prank of turning people's backpacks inside out.

Alex Gil got to school a little late that day and saw people crying in the hallways. The principal, Denise Herrmann, stopped him and told him, because she knew he was one of Cameron's best friends, and he fell to his knees. He thought about a text Cameron had sent him the day before. Cameron had gone to tryouts for varsity basketball but hadn't yet gotten his required physical, so he had asked whether Alex thought he could get in to see the doctor the next day. He must have sent the text only a few hours before he died.

In her creative-writing class later that day, Tarn Wilson asked how many people were friends with Cameron, and a third of the students raised a hand. She then asked how many had been in a class with him, and everyone's hand went up. The kids were usually "silly and joyful," she later said, but that period, they were "utterly and completely silent."

That morning the school district's superintendent, Glenn "Max" McGee, called Kim Diorio, the principal of the system's other public high school, Palo Alto High, to warn her, "This is going to hit everyone really hard." McGee was new to the district that year, but he'd known the history when he took the job. The 10-year suicide rate for the two high schools is between four and five times the national average. Starting in the spring of 2009 and stretching over nine months, three Gunn students, one incoming freshman, and one recent graduate had put themselves in front of an oncoming Caltrain. Another recent graduate had hung himself. While the intervening years had been quieter, they had not been comforting. School counselors remained "overwhelmed and overloaded" with an influx of kids considered high risk, says Roni Gillenson, who has helped oversee Gunn's mental-health program since 2006. Twelve percent of Palo Alto high-school students surveyed in the

2013–14 school year reported having seriously contemplated suicide in the past 12 months.

In McGee's third month on the job, about three weeks before Cameron's death, a girl from a local private school had jumped off an overpass. Then, a day later, a kid who'd graduated from Gunn the year before, Quinn Gens, had killed himself on the tracks. Now it was not even Thanksgiving, and two students affiliated with Gunn were already dead.

Suicide clusters—defined as multiple deaths in close succession and proximity—feed on viral news, which feeds on social connections. McGee and the other administrators worried about vulnerable students reading too many details and overidentifying with Cameron. He had played basketball for years, so he knew people at both public high schools in town; his sister was in middle school; he seemed to have friends everywhere, and the grief was gathering momentum. Diorio had been the head of guidance at Palo Alto High (“Paly,” as it's known in the community) in 2009 and 2010, during the last suicide cluster, but the big differences this time, she told me, were smartphones and social media. All day long, kids at Paly could get updates from Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. By second period many already knew it was the Caltrain, again. That day, like every day, you could hear the train from most of the classrooms, passing every 20 minutes or so. That day, one student later told me, the warning whistle seemed like the cannon that goes off in *The Hunger Games* every time a kid dies.

Interview with Hanna Rosin

Atlantic national correspondent Hannah Rosin explains the research behind her December cover story.

Thankfully, or maybe eerily, the school district was stocked with suicide-prevention experts: professionals from Stanford and amateurs who'd become deeply knowledgeable in recent years. After the 2009–10 cluster, the school district had put together a comprehensive post-suicide “toolkit” and trained the staff on what to do to help prevent another cluster from developing. Statistically, that had been unlikely. “Echo clusters,” meaning second clusters in the same location within a decade, are extremely rare. Gunn’s teachers were told they could have a substitute for the day if they felt too traumatized. Grief counselors roamed the school grounds, making themselves available to the groups of students who were standing around crying. Staff checked in with students who were thought to be especially vulnerable.

In training, they’d learned that one key to heading off copycats was not romanticizing the death, so they struggled to hit just the right tone. They had to avoid turning Cameron into a hero or a martyr without insulting his memory or his devastated family. They had to make a space for the kids to grieve without letting wreath-and-teddy-bear memorials take over the campus. In 2009, to commemorate Jean-Paul “J.P.” Blanchard, the first kid in that cluster to die on the tracks, students had spread rose petals all over the school. Tarn Wilson recalls them as beautiful and haunting but also morbid, and exactly the kind of prop that a depressed teenager might imagine as a

backdrop to his own future tragedy.

The night after Cameron's death, some classmates sneaked onto campus and chalked it up with messages like WE LOVE YOU CAMERON and RIP CAMERON—but administrators talked with students and, after a day, had the messages erased. Eventually some students decided to hold a memorial service off campus, at a local elementary school. One of the people who planned it was Isabelle Blanchard, the junior-class president that year—and one of J.P.'s younger sisters. "I am 15 years old and I just organized a memorial," she said to her mother, Kathleen, when she got home.

Implicit in her weary statement of fact was the underlying question: Why? How could it be that they all lived in a place that inspired jealousy from out-of-towners, where the coolest gadgets and ideas come from, where the optimism is boundless, and where, as Kathleen put it to me somewhat sardonically, "people are working on inventions that will slow aging and probably one day stop death"—and yet also a place where a junior in high school is closely familiar with the funerals of other teens?

IN THE NEARLY FIVE YEARS since the last cluster, many Palo Alto parents had allowed themselves to drift into a hazy and self-protective way of thinking: The kids who killed themselves must have been social outcasts or victims of clear mental illness; at the very least they must have been obviously struggling. Cameron's death made it hard to maintain that narrative, because "he was like everyone's kid," says one parent whose son was a friend of his. "The prevailing feeling was: *What's the difference between this kid and my kid? Nothing. There is no safe space. My kid could be next.*"

At an impromptu gathering at the Lee family's house that afternoon, Cameron's father read his suicide note aloud. In it, Cameron explained that his death had nothing to do with school, friends, or family. The note provided no clear reason for what he'd done, and the community was desperate for one.

The only anomaly anyone could identify was that Cameron never seemed to sleep. Alex Gil told me that if you were up at 3 a.m. on a Saturday and needed someone to go to Happy Donuts with you, Cameron was your man. And throughout the week, he was typically on Twitter or Snapchat late at night. When Alex once asked why he was always up at odd hours, Cameron told him he was doing homework. That was standard around town, to humble-brag about staying up all night to study. But Alex, his friend since kindergarten, didn't believe him. "Cam was really good with time management," he told me. "He was a great student, all A's. He didn't really worry about school. It came easy to him."

train has become a common instrument of teen suicide—and a constant reminder of
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Some three months after Cameron Lee's suicide, and about four months after that of Quinn Gens, Harry Lee, a Gunn senior unrelated to Cameron, killed

himself by jumping from the roof of a building. One suicide cluster could be anomalous. In the United States, there are about five youth clusters a year. But now Palo Alto was well into its second. You'd have to be blind or stupid not to see a pattern, and Palo Alto's parents were neither. Seventy-four percent of Gunn students have at least one parent with a graduate degree. They'd moved their families to that school district because they know how to do their research. Last year, Gunn was ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* as one of the nation's top five STEM schools. Every year, about 20 of its seniors get into Stanford, which is just two miles away, and a quarter are offered spots at University of California schools, which are notoriously competitive these days.

Since I went to Stanford, in the early '90s, the surrounding public schools have been utterly transformed by the tech explosion. Gunn, and to a lesser extent Palo Alto High School, is legendary all over the world. Steve Jobs's old house is in the neighborhood. Chinese patriarchs buy homes in the community and send their families, so their kids can go to school there. Parents sacrifice vacations and plan their budgets carefully so they can afford a house in the district. (The college friends I stayed with while reporting this story—both full-time physicians—got priced out of their rental during the school year and had to move out of the district, to nearby San Mateo.)

Gunn is a distillation of what elite parents expect from a school.

Today Gunn is like countless other high-achieving high schools in countless other affluent communities—New York; Washington, D.C.; Dallas;

Greenwich, Connecticut; Seattle; Los Angeles—only more so. It is an extreme distillation of what parents in the meritocratic elite expect from a school. The opportunities are limitless and the competition is tough and the pleasant chatter among the parents concerns chances for enrichment. Kids are tracked into “lanes” in math and science and English, which become a big part of their social identity. The school always sends a handful of students to the math and biology Olympiads, and typically some of them place in the top 10 percent. Layered on top of that is the usual array of extracurriculars expected at any affluent school, where it’s okay to have fun as long as that’s not all you’re doing. The robotics team almost always scores near the top in one of the nation’s biggest competitions. The school’s 2013 musical was voted the best youth production in the San Francisco region on BroadwayWorld.com. A recent TEDx event was the largest ever held at any American high school. And that’s to say nothing of the prizewinning apps and inventions created by individual students.

FOLLOW-UP

[i receives a letter from a unity leader in Palo Alto](#)

But in the e-mails traded among parents in the weeks after Cameron’s death, the obvious worry surfaced about whether all this emphasis on excellence imposed a cost on the kids—a worry that is also beginning to show up in parenting books and op-eds in newspapers all over the country. Julie Lythcott-

Haims, a parent of two and a former freshman dean at Stanford, summarized the prevailing sentiment of those autumn e-mails as: *What are we doing to our kids?* *Palo Alto Online*, a community news site, tried to maintain decorum in the comment sections, but the anguish and guilt spilled over. “I think we have to look at the attitude of all the adults in this community,” one person wrote. “It is we who are to blame putting the pressure on the kids to succeed ... No amount of school counselling will change the parents’ attitudes.” Another insisted: “There are ways to teach students so they learn but are not tortured.”

The night after Cameron's death, a sophomore at Gunn named Martha Cabot put up a YouTube video that eventually logged more than 80,000 views, and comments from parents all over the country. Sitting in her bedroom in a T-shirt, with curls falling loose from her ponytail, she confirmed many parents' worst fears about themselves. "The amount of stress on a student is *ridiculous*," Martha said. "Students feel the constant need at our school of having to keep up with all the achievements." She was recording the video mostly for parents, she explained, because apparently it took a suicide to get adults to pay attention. "We'll do just fine, even though we got a B-minus on that chem test," she said. "And no, I won't join the debate team for *you*."

Had parents really given their kids the idea that they had to perform? That their love had to be earned with A's and Advanced Placement tests and trophies? They hadn't meant to. Yet there, from one of their own kids, was the rebuke that in this community, no place or time or language existed that allowed kids to be vulnerable, much less broken, or even just to be: "We love our moms and we love our dads," Martha said. "But *calm down*."

IN THE LATE 1990s, when she was an assistant professor in Yale's psychiatry department, Suniya Luthar was doing research at an inner-city school in Connecticut. She wanted to know whether misbehavior correlated more with poverty or with a stage of adolescence. She needed a second school to use as a comparison. An undergraduate student she worked with had connections at a school in a Connecticut suburb that was more upscale, and Luthar got permission to distribute her surveys there. The results were not what she expected. In the inner-city school, 86 percent of students received free or reduced-price lunches; in the suburban school, 1 percent did. Yet in the richer school, the proportion of kids who smoked, drank, or used hard drugs was significantly *higher*—as was the rate of serious anxiety and depression. This anomaly started Luthar down a career-long track studying the vulnerabilities of students within what she calls "a culture of affluence." I

called Luthar in March to find out whether the anxiety she was recording amounted to familiar teenage angst or something more serious. As it happened, she was about to fly to Palo Alto. A meeting on adolescents and suicide, hosted by Stanford's psychiatry department, had been organized in a hurry. Earlier that month a fifth kid had killed himself, Byron Zhu, a 15-year-old sophomore at Palo Alto High. He had walked in front of an early-morning northbound train. The police were still at the scene when kids were biking to school that morning; the principal, who had rushed over, asked the police to put up a special barrier so they wouldn't see.

What disturbs Levine most is that the teenagers she sees no longer rebel. They have no sense of agency.

Luthar had been invited to give a presentation on affluent youth as a largely unrecognized at-risk group. Convincing people that rich kids are at high risk isn't easy, she said. But she has amassed the most thorough data set we have on that group, from schools scattered across the country. Luthar's data come from school districts where families have median incomes of more than \$200,000, and private schools where tuition is close to \$30,000 a year. Her research suggests a U-shaped curve in pathologies among children, by class. At each extreme—poor and rich—kids are showing unusually high rates of dysfunction. On the surface, the rich kids seem to be thriving. They have cars, nice clothes, good grades, easy access to health care, and, on paper, excellent prospects. But many of them are not navigating adolescence successfully.

The rich middle- and high-school kids Luthar and her collaborators have

studied show higher rates of alcohol and drug abuse on average than poor kids, and much higher rates than the national norm. They report clinically significant depression or anxiety or delinquent behaviors at a rate two to three times the national average. Starting in seventh grade, the rich cohort includes just as many kids who display troubling levels of delinquency as the poor cohort, although the rule-breaking takes different forms. The poor kids, for example, fight and carry weapons more frequently, which Luthar explains as possibly self-protective. The rich kids, meanwhile, report higher levels of lying, cheating, and theft.

| Gunn referred to as “the suicide school,” students are rallying around their high
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“We assume that because [these kids] have money and a good education, everything is fine,” Luthar says. And in the long run, money and education will protect them. But in adolescence, the dangers posed by the culture of

affluence can be “quite potent.” That doesn’t mean rich kids are more likely to kill themselves. Studies on youth suicide have generally turned up few differences among social classes. But it does mean many are deeply suffering.

One of the two major causes of distress, Luthar found, was the “pressure to excel at multiple academic and extracurricular pursuits.” In one study, for example, kids were asked to choose and rank their parents’ top five values, from a list of 10. Half of the values were related to achievement (“attend a good college,” “make a lot of money,” “excel academically”), and the other half to well-being and personal character (“are honest,” “are kind to others,” “are generally happy with yourself and your life”). When the kids chose a greater number of achievement-related goals, that usually correlated with personal troubles, Luthar said.

The kids were also asked how much they identified with sentences such as “The fewer mistakes I make, the more people will like me” and “If someone does a task at work/school better than I, then I feel like I failed the whole task.” From their answers, Luthar constructed a profile of elite American adolescents whose self-worth is tied to their achievements and who see themselves as catastrophically flawed if they don’t meet the highest standards of success. Because a certain kind of success seems well within reach, they feel they have to attain it at all costs—a phenomenon she refers to as “I can, therefore I must.” Middle-class kids, she told me, generally do not live with the expectation that they should go to Stanford or earn \$200,000 a year. “If I’ve never been to the moon,” she said of middle-class families, “why would I expect my kids to go there?” The yardstick for the children of the meritocratic elite is different, and it can intimidate as much as it can empower.

The second major cause of distress that Luthar identified was perhaps more surprising: Affluent kids felt remarkably isolated from their parents. When I wrote “The Overprotected Kid” for this magazine last year, I assumed that the

brand of helicopter parenting I described as typical of my cohort involved a trade-off. Parents might be sheltering their kids, but at least they were more emotionally in tune with them than, say, the parents of the '70s divorce generation were with their children. Luthar disabused me of this comforting narrative. The kids in the affluent communities she studied felt their parents to be no more available to them, either emotionally or physically, than the kids in severe poverty did.

Some of the measures Luthar used were objective: Did the family eat dinner together, or hang out in the evenings? Here, she discovered that some busy parents would leave adolescents alone in the afternoon and evening and often weren't home at all during those hours. She also measured the kids' feelings of closeness—"My father understands me," or "My mother knows when I am upset." Here again Luthar saw a fissure: Children had the sense that their parents monitored their activities and cared deeply about how they were spending their time, but that didn't translate into feeling close. Many children felt they were being prodded toward very specific goals and behaviors by parental cues, some subtle, some less so. Their parents glowed warmly when they did well in school or sports but seemed let down when they didn't. Often the kids learned to hide their failures—real or imagined—for fear of disappointing their parents. Other research has shown that a feeling of closeness to parents was inversely linked to household income, meaning that the most-affluent kids felt the most alienated. "It's mind-boggling," Luthar says. "We are comparing them to a group of parents we think of as being in dire straits—largely single mothers on welfare whose circumstances are assumed to affect the quality of their parenting. And yet kids from these affluent families, mostly Caucasian, say they feel no closer to their parents than the poor kids do."

Luthar's research was incorporated into the 2006 best seller *The Price of Privilege*, by Madeline Levine, a child psychologist who practices in the Bay

Area. She reported that the adolescents she was encountering would “complain bitterly of being too pressured, misunderstood, anxious, angry, sad, and empty.” In the past couple of years, other best sellers have sounded a similar note. William Deresiewicz, a former Yale professor who contributes to this magazine, argues in *Excellent Sheep* that elite education “manufactures students who are smart and talented and driven, yes, but also anxious, timid, and lost, with little intellectual curiosity and a stunted sense of purpose.” The *New York Times* columnist Frank Bruni’s *Where You Go Is Not Who You’ll Be: An Antidote to the College Admissions Mania* warns of the dangers of insisting that admission to an elite college is necessary for a successful life.

ote on a local news site of a deep sickness in the community. (Brian L. Frank)

After leaving Stanford, Julie Lythcott-Haims wrote a book, published in June, called *How to Raise an Adult: Break Free of the Overparenting Trap and Prepare Your Kid for Success*. In it, she confesses that as a dean, she had interacted with

students who relied on their parents “in ways that felt, simply, *off*” and who seemed “existentially impotent.” She detailed the growing mental-health crisis at colleges, and described the brilliant, accomplished students who “would sit on my couch holding their fragile, brittle parts together, resigned to the fact that this outwardly successful situation was their miserable life.”

I’ve read all these books, and so have many of my friends. We have kids this age, or about to be this age, and yet somehow we can’t absorb the message. I didn’t, really, until I spent some time in Palo Alto.

Since Levine wrote *The Price of Privilege*, she’s watched the stress in the Bay Area and in affluent communities all over the country become more pervasive and more acute. What disturbs her most is that the teenagers she sees no longer rebel. A decade ago, she used to referee family fights in her office, she told me, where the teens would tell their parents, “This is bad for me! I’m not doing this.” Now, she reports, the teenagers have no sense of agency. They still complain bitterly about all the same things, but they feel they have no choice. Many have also fallen prey to what Levine calls a “mass delusion” that there is but one path to a successful life, and that it is very narrow.

Adolescents no longer typically identify parents or peers as the greatest source of their stress, Levine says. They point to school. But that itself may suggest a submission of sorts—the unquestioned adoption of parental norms.

In March, after spending two days among Palo Alto’s parents and civic leaders, Luthar came to see the community, still in shock over the suicides, as hovering somewhere between fear and denial. The meeting she attended with select parents, scholars, mental-health professionals, and community leaders was academically rigorous and yielded many important insights. But it was “eerie” in its almost complete lack of feeling, she later said. What she sensed from the group was a lot of “grief and terror and resentment,” but all under the surface. “There are a lot of very hard truths that are just not being

spoken.”

TRAGEDIES DO NOT always bring people together; sometimes they just deepen the rifts between them. The day after Byron Zhu died, a Paly senior named Andrew Lu posted on his blog a diagram of three circles, labeled “Palo Alto,” “Male,” and “Asian.” “It seems that the demographic most at risk are Asian (Chinese) males in high school (hey, that’s what I am!),” he wrote. Three of the boys who had died in the past academic year had at least some Asian heritage.

Andrew was broaching a very touchy subject, one that had come up more rudely in comments on *Palo Alto Online*. Heavy stress among “good kids” was the product of “a nasty competitive atmosphere contrived by unethical Tiger Mothers,” one commenter wrote. At the end of some of my conversations, a student, teacher, or counselor would look around to make sure no one was listening and then whisper a story about an Asian kid being punished or even kicked out of the house for a night after getting a B or failing to get into Stanford. I’d heard how new East Asian immigrant parents mistakenly transposed the reality of education in, say, China or Korea, which is that how you do on a single test can determine your entire future. Gunn is more than 40 percent Asian, and some non-Asian parents, particularly ones who’d grown up in town when the Asian population was smaller, felt the shift was poisoning the culture of the entire school.

By late March, 42 Gunn students had been hospitalized or treated for suicidal thoughts.

But how much does Andrew Lu's diagram explain? In the 2009–10 suicide cluster, most of the high-school kids who'd killed themselves were not Asian. In Suniya Luthar's view, the resentment over Asian parents' effect on Gunn's culture was something to be aired and discussed. After all, she said, it was true that some Asian kids did face intense pressure from their parents, on top of a cultural stigma against seeking help for mental-health issues. But it was also true that non-Asians were too quick to deflect scrutiny away from themselves. Luthar's research documenting problems among affluent kids was conducted in schools with largely white populations. And two weeks after Byron Zhu died, it was a member of a different student demographic—white, female—who, in an op-ed for *Palo Alto Online*, wrote an unforgettable lament over what the headline called “The Sorrows of Young Palo Altans.”

“A piece of you cringes when you hear that your friend has been preparing for the SAT with classes since last summer, and that they're already scoring a 2000,” wrote Carolyn Walworth, who was then a junior and Paly's student representative to the school board. She continued:

(And what about ... the girl taking a summer immersion program to skip ahead and get into AP French her sophomore year? And that internship your best friend has with a Stanford professor?) You can't help but slip into the system of competitive insanity ... We are not teenagers. We are lifeless bodies in a system that breeds competition, hatred, and discourages teamwork and genuine learning. We lack sincere passion. We are sick ... Why is that not getting through to this community? Why does this insanity that is our school district continue?

As the year progressed and the sense of crisis deepened, school-board

meetings grew more crowded and contentious. At a meeting I attended on the evening of March 24, the tension settled around the problem of zero period. Gunn had an optional period of academic classes starting at 7:20 a.m., before the regular school day began, so kids could take additional classes or finish the day earlier to do homework or train for sports. Ken Dauber, a school-board member, was one of the people trying to end it. His daughter Amanda had killed herself in June 2008, after graduating from the Rhode Island School of Design. (She'd gone to high school in Illinois.) Dauber, a software engineer at Google, doesn't hide this part of his history, but he doesn't mention it much, either. He'd run for the school board in 2014 partially because he felt that after the first suicide cluster, the district had done too little to address the root causes of student stress.

“We know from the literature that academic pressure can cause anxiety and depression, which in turn can cause suicidality,” Dauber told me. He was advocating a series of measures to reduce scholastic pressure. Concerning zero period, he later told me that the American Academy of Pediatrics had recommended in 2014 starting high school no earlier than 8:30, because studies show that a host of adolescent mental-health issues are related to insufficient sleep.

But at the meeting, the adolescents in attendance weren't buying it. Chloe Sorensen, a Gunn sophomore, had conducted a thorough online survey of her schoolmates. She brought along a thick packet filled with the responses. In her summary, Chloe noted that 89.5 percent of all student responders did not want the option of zero period removed, and that 90.8 percent of students currently enrolled in zero period did not want it to end. “Stop telling us that our age makes our voices irrelevant,” she said. “It makes us feel more powerless and alone.”

The written testimonies in that packet are at times alarming for their

Stockholm-syndrome quality. “I would just like to say that a lot of the stress” is “from all the limits you guys are trying to enforce,” reads one typical statement. “Limiting when we can take APs or limiting numbers and classes and honors and such just makes us students more flustered and stressed about the future.” Dauber coded the written responses and determined that the No. 1 reason students wanted zero period was to free up more time to do homework in the afternoon and evening. “It’s a coping mechanism,” he said. “The kids are losing sleep to cope with excessive homework. They are just finding ways to deal with issues we should be dealing with directly.”

an engineer and school-board member whose daughter killed herself in 2008, believes
is not done enough to address the root causes of academic stress. (Brian L. Frank)

Even so, students such as Chloe Sorensen might be onto something when they intuit that a factor as discrete and literal as zero period can’t possibly be the true source of their distress. After all, Byron Zhu, the last kid who’d died, went

to Palo Alto High, which doesn't offer early-morning academic classes. Too much homework doesn't feel sufficient to explain the statistic that Denise Herrmann, Gunn's principal, reported to the board the following week: Since the school year had begun, 42 Gunn students had been hospitalized or treated for "significant suicide ideation."

AS THE YEAR UNFOLDED, people with intimate knowledge of suicide—unwanted, indelible—began to speak up more. Kathleen Blanchard was one. So was Julia Tachibana, whose brother killed himself in 2003. They were parents, siblings, or friends of kids who'd died years earlier. Some were initially reluctant, perhaps because their voices were so discordant with Silicon Valley's relentless optimism. But now, with the community plainly in crisis, they became much more visible. I met with Taylor Chiu, a former Paly student, in the starter apartment in San Francisco that she shares with her boyfriend. Chiu had attempted suicide in 2002, when she was a freshman in high school. She has a job and furniture collected from friends and pretty decorative rugs and nice-smelling soap in the bathroom. She's on her way to a new life and has no reason to relive her old one, but when Tachibana, a friend of hers, asked whether she would talk with me, Chiu felt an urgency to explain what had happened to her.

When she was little, Chiu and her family lived in what she described as an idyllic house in Sonoma County, where she and her brother spent weekday afternoons in the wilderness out back. Then, in 1998, during the tech boom, her dad got a job in Silicon Valley. Her parents chose Palo Alto because it didn't feel like endless suburbia, and because of the schools. Once, Chiu reported to her mom that some of her schoolmates got paid \$20 for every A they earned, and her mom said, "Why would we pay you? It's just what we expect of you."

"I could never classify my mom as overly pushy or strict," Chiu told me, but

she had some rules that were so obvious, they didn't have to be articulated: You did your homework before playing; you always turned in your assignments. Her mom worked part time, but she picked up the kids after school every day. She always knew what tests were coming up, or whether their grades had slipped. The family ate dinner together most nights.

The kids had internalized their parents' priorities and didn't know how to break free.

In 2001, during her freshman year, Chiu decided to try out for water polo, because she'd been a "water baby" and was still a pretty good swimmer and anyway couldn't compete with the soccer kids who'd been playing since they were 6. She was also a Girl Scout and played trombone in the school jazz band, and then she got chosen for a role in a historical play, working closely with a teacher she loved. When the water-polo season ended, she joined the swim team. Most school days, she would swim from 6 to 7 a.m. After school she'd go to swim practice, then to play rehearsal until 7 p.m., then home to study. Wedged in somehow were two band practices a week, plus her Girl Scout meeting. Her parents were proud, but she began to focus on how it was dark every morning when she left her house, and dark when she came home at night. The words she used at the time to talk about how she was feeling were so mundane that you could be forgiven for glossing right over them—*stressed*, *tired*—but when she went on runs on the weekends, she'd often start to sob. "I was exhausted to the bone," she said. "I remember just not being happy about anything, and I just couldn't make it slow down. And I thought there would never be any escape."

Her first semester, Chiu got an F on a geometry test, which “totally traumatized me.” Her relationship with her parents started to fray, “because it just took too much energy to speak in a polite tone of voice.” She began to dread swim practice and even Girl Scouts and band, “but I didn’t want to be a quitter.” She remembers wishing that someone had broken up with her, or that she was anorexic, or that she had some reason to explain to her parents why she felt so sad. “I also felt like I was already saying that I was too stressed, and nobody—neither my parents nor my teachers—seemed to care or take me seriously.” She didn’t want to ask for a break, she said, because people would think she was lazy. “But having a mental disorder? That’s serious. People would listen to that.” It would be, she thought, like a man being held back from a fight: He would never have to admit he couldn’t win.

One night in February, after swim practice, Chiu was taking a bath and listening to a moody Alicia Keys song on a CD her mom had bought her. She’d taken a bottle of Advil from a cabinet downstairs. “The only reason I waffled,” she told me, “was because I knew it would probably break my mom’s heart, and I didn’t know if I could do that to her.” But she did it: She swallowed all the pills. Not long after, she put on her sweats and went down to dinner—“We have dinner every night. You can’t get out of that.” At the table, her younger brother noticed she was acting strange, and then she confessed that she’d swallowed some pills.

“How much?” her dad asked.

“I don’t know.”

Her parents went searching for the bottle, and once they saw that it was empty, they drove her straight to the hospital.

She feels lucky, she told me, that she hadn’t heard of any high schoolers jumping in front of a train. “I’d read about overdoses, but the train just never

occurred to me. I wonder if, in that state of desperation, on one of my really bad days, it would have seemed like a good idea to me.”

MANY WELL-EDUCATED PARENTS are quick to distance themselves from the Tiger Mom. We might admire her children’s accomplishments, but we tend to believe these can be coaxed out of a child through applause, not scolding. In fact, this particular combination of lavish praise and insistence on achievement defines our era of protective, meritocratic parenting. But it turns out that this combination can be just as hard on a child’s well-being. Avi Assor, a psychology professor at Ben-Gurion University, in Israel, has studied how parenting affects children’s ability to cope with school pressure. Providing praise and love when a child performs especially well can *look* like healthy parenting, he says, because the parents are giving the child more of a good thing. But if praise comes only when a child succeeds, the child is likely to develop a sense that his or her parents’ affection depends upon good grades, or touchdowns, or mastery of a religious text, or whatever the parents’ priorities might be.

The Israeli high-school students Assor and his colleagues studied who perceived their parents as showing warmth only when they were acing school were described by their teachers as showing little intellectual interest in subjects that wouldn’t be tested. They felt “deeply hurt” when they got a bad grade.

attempted suicide as a freshman in 2002, says that only after the attempt did she begin to identify her own priorities. (Brian L. Frank)

They had internalized their parents' priorities, and though they felt conflicted about them, they didn't quite know how to break free. So in Assor's studies, kids identified with statements such as "Sometimes I feel that my need to study hard controls me and leads me to give up things I really want to do" and "I often feel a strong internal pressure to exert control over my negative emotions, even in situations where such control is not necessary."

The aim of healthy parenting, Assor says, should not be to shower children only with praise and trophies, or to encourage self-esteem based on no real achievements. It should be to disentangle love from the project of parental or pedagogical guidance. Giving specific, positive feedback about something a child has tried hard at, or critical yet constructive feedback when a child fails, is perfectly appropriate. "But being warm and nice is a different matter," he says. "We want to be nice and warm also when our kids do not achieve and when they do not try hard to achieve." The hope is that, secure in love, a child can experiment more freely and begin to find his or her own voice.

Chiu told me that after she got out of the hospital, she felt more empowered to tell her parents "No, I can't do this" or "No, I won't do that." Her parents had been "more effective than I realized," she says, at instilling certain values, such as never quitting, and now she had to figure out where her own limits

were. She did quit the swim team, and dropped down a lane in chemistry. She asked her teachers whether she could skip the work she'd missed while she was gone, and they all assured her that it wasn't important. The word *quitter* flitted into her mind and then flitted out again. It was liberating to give something up and have nothing catastrophic happen.

With the help of therapists and time, Chiu could better explain what she had experienced—depression, the dangers of not sleeping enough. She learned that her idea that she could escape by manufacturing a mental-health crisis was itself a sign of a mental-health crisis. Not atypically for people who come to consider suicide, she'd lost her ability to think clearly or solve problems, and ended up trapped in a tunnel ruminating about escape, until self-destruction became the only light she could see.

Chiu still wound up getting good grades and going to Harvard, as her father had done. The difference was that she no longer felt driven by something she didn't understand. "The expectation was off," she said, "so I could just blow everyone's mind." In college she studied sociology, and what stayed with her was an image of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon. It depicts a prison overseen by an omnipresent guard, but she recalled the prison as being constructed in a way that ensured the inmates could keep tabs on one another, "and you don't even need walls or fences or physical restraints. You just restrain them by creating a social norm." After we talked, she e-mailed me a Steve Jobs quote that was inspiring her lately: "Everything around you that you call life was made up by people ... and you can change it."

WHEN YOU LOOK at suicide statistics, you inevitably begin to see patterns. Unlike murders, which are more common on weekends, suicides spike on Mondays and after holidays; researchers guess this has to do with the disappointment that follows thwarted expectations. Adolescent suicide has dropped dramatically since the 1990s, although in the

past few years it's started to creep back up. (Researchers surmise that the drop is largely attributable to the proliferation of antidepressant prescriptions and to more-effective suicide-prevention efforts.) Almost by definition, suicide points to underlying psychological vulnerability. The thinking behind it is often obsessive and then impulsive; a kid can be ruminating about the train for a long time and then one night something ordinary—a botched quiz, a breakup—leads him or her to the tracks.

And of course, one thing that puts a kid at risk is someone else's suicide. At Gunn, the scariest thing kids told me is that now, in one student's phrasing, "suicide is one of the options."

Because this is Palo Alto, the community has marshaled legions of experts on sleep, stress, social contagion, and any other potentially relevant subject they've been able to identify. But they can never be sure that the research will cover the darkest terrain of any individual kid's mind. Recently I listened to David Lester, a psychology professor at Stockton University, in New Jersey, and an authority on suicide, being interviewed on a podcast. "I'm expected to know the answers to questions such as why people kill themselves," he said. "And myself and my friends, we often, when we're relaxing, admit that we really don't have a good idea of why people kill themselves."

While reporting this story, I came to understand quite a lot about academic stress and adolescent misery, and about my own parenting, and about how urgent it is for parents and educators to question their own good intentions. But the link between teenage alienation and the decision to die never much clarified. In fact, the closer I got to the heart of this story, the less I felt I understood that link. Some details neatly fit the narrative that academic pressure has caused lethal amounts of stress in Palo Alto—Taylor Chiu's experience, for example. Will Dickens, who died in 2009, had a learning disability, and his mother, Janet Dixon-Dickens, told me he never forgot it at

Gunn. Cameron Lee, on the other hand, wasn't obviously oppressed by schoolwork, and neither was J.P. Blanchard, or Sonya Raymakers, a girl who died in June 2009, soon after being accepted into her dream program at New York University.

After J.P.'s suicide, Kathleen Blanchard "went on a mission," she told me, chasing down teachers and school administrators in an attempt to gather every piece of information about his behavior in the weeks before he died. She was looking for an explanation, a reason, but eventually she realized that she might never get a fully satisfying one. "I'm resolved to live with incomplete answers," she said.

As Kathleen and I talked in her living room, I heard a train send out its alarm, and she caught my startled look. "My son died right there," she said, pointing out the window. The tracks were a block from the house. He'd grown up to the sound of the train, while brushing his teeth, doing his homework, falling asleep—every 20 minutes or so. That morning, she'd dropped him off at school and he'd walked right to the tracks. When we met, Kathleen was wearing a sunshine-yellow shirt and red lipstick, and it was clear that she was making a great effort to remain composed. She still calls him "my boy," as if he's in the next room with his sisters doing his homework. "I should have been more curious," she said. "I should have stopped doing the laundry and looked at him and listened."

believes she may never know why her late son, J.P., killed himself. (Brian L. Frank)

After Harry Lee died, Kathleen attended a school meeting full of fretful parents. Two of them, she recalled, had angrily demanded, “Where’s the data?,” meaning demographic information about the kids who’d died. Kathleen stood up and said, “First of all, you are talking about my son. And second, they are not robots. You can’t break them open and find the broken circuit. It’s so complicated. There is so much you don’t know, and you are never going to know ... We are not going to have ‘the answer.’ We will just do our best.”

Her metaphor reminded me of an exhibit I’d seen recently on Maillardet’s automaton. Around 1800, the Swiss mechanic Henri Maillardet built a sort of robot that captivated audiences with its ability to re-create four drawings and three poems, in French and English. Initially, the mechanical boy was displayed in the formal costume of a European courtier. Now the boy is displayed at the Franklin Institute, in Philadelphia, without clothes, because, as a sign explains, “today we marvel at the design of the automaton itself—rather than being fooled by its lifelike motion.” In these days of assumed meritocracy, where children can be turned into anything, we admire them as displays of remarkable engineering, to be tweaked and fine-tuned into bilingual perfection. What we’ve lost, perhaps, is a sense that there may be things about them we can’t know or understand, and that that mysterious quality, separate from us, is what we should marvel at.

Admitting we don't entirely know why teenagers kill themselves isn't an invitation to do nothing to prevent it from happening. It's just a call for humility, a short pause to acknowledge that a sense of absolute certainty about what children should do or be or how they should operate is part of what landed us here.

AMONG PALO ALTO'S middle-school kids, Gunn is known as "the suicide school." The reputation has brought the students closer, given them something to rally against. Earlier this year they created a Tumblr featuring pictures of kids holding a mini whiteboard that reads A TITAN IS ... RESILIENT, referring to the school mascot, OR A TITAN IS ... ADVENTUROUS OR A TITAN IS ... FAB! or whatever they want to write. Over the summer, a few kids made a documentary about the suicides, called *Unmasked*. "You don't need to get the best grades or do the best anything," one says in the trailer. "Just do what makes you smile." Ken Dauber won the debate over early-morning classes at Gunn. They've been abolished, and the school has adopted other academic reforms as well. Caltrain is working with the city of Palo Alto to install cameras and increase the height of fences along the tracks.

After my interview with Kim Diorio, the Palo Alto High principal, she suggested I walk around the quad to see what the kids were doing during lunch. Diorio says she often asks kids what they do for fun, "and they can't answer that question." On the day I visited, they had an easy answer. It was Field Day, and the school had set up giant bouncy castles and slides in bright rainbow colors all over the quad. The sun was out, and the kids were walking around barefoot, speeding down the slides in groups of twos or threes like they tell you not to do when you're in kindergarten. The speakers were powerful enough that for a good hour, the music drowned out the sound of the Caltrain coming through town. In front of the biggest slide, a group of kids formed a line, grabbing one another by the waist. "Train!" one of them yelled, and they all tried to climb the wrong way up the slide until they crashed back

down together. They're kids, so they can still forget.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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