

# Bullying devastates lives – until victims find ways to heal

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Enlarge [By Rachel Korman, USA TODAY](#)

Josée Blanco consoling Frank Foster, 12, after Blanco's presentation on bullying before hundreds of middle school students from local Salt Lake City. Blanco addressed 85,000 at a school in Paul in December. Blanco was bullied as a child and is now an adult aged 48.

By Janet Korman, USA TODAY

Kelly Shedd had red hair. Meg Rafferty was shy.

And Josée Blanco was just different.

Those were their crimes.

The punishments for Blanco, Shedd, Rafferty, and others like them? Being isolated, punched and spit upon. They were yelled at, taunted and shunned. They spent hard time in isolation, crying themselves to sleep at night, sometimes wanting to die.

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This wasn't in prison. They were in school. And their tormentors were not adults, but other children. And yet, now as adults, the memories of childhood bullying still haunt their daily lives.

"I was relentlessly tormented from fifth grade until the end of high school simply for being different," says Blanco, a former public relations executive from Chicago. Blanco wrote about her experiences in *Please Stop Laughing at Us... One Survivor's Extraordinary Quest to Prevent School Bullying*, which was published in the spring. "I was ambushed. I wasn't find my belongings floating in the toilet. I was spat at and kicked and worse — ignored."

Blanco, a school consultant who talks to students and teachers about ways to prevent bullying — often coauthoring — still bears the emotional pain of bullying, including raw feedback to child abuse treatment. But she's getting help and now also wants other adults who have been bullied to seek help as well.

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Though cyberbullying has taken center stage among many in the psychological community, "adult survivors of peer abuse," as she calls her demographic, often suffer in silence, she says.

Rafferty, of Eden Prairie, Minn., 52, knew she was different and that there was something wrong with me," she says. But like many adult survivors, "I tried to hide it."

Not everyone who is bullied has lifelong trauma. But there's no question that "unrelenting, daily hostilities that may escalate to threats or actual aggression can be on par with torture and child abuse," or that "repeated and severe bullying can cause psychological trauma," says Daniel Nelson, medical director of the Child Psychiatry Unit at the Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center.

"There's no question that bullying in certain instances can be absolutely devastating."

The abuse that Kelly Shedd of Lafayette, Ind., endured more than two decades ago still affects her, even at age 42.

Shedd's crime? Being born with red hair — and having a name that unfortunately made rhyming taunts simple.

"Being bullied set me up as a mark," she says. "I don't fight back." It's so sad that she likes to have her husband with her when she goes out in public — although lately things have been improving for her, ever since she began focusing on the issue.

"I've always wanted to know: Why? Why do they bully?"

That's a simple question with many answers. Experts have different theories on why certain children get picked on, but most agree that being different — in even the smallest way — can lead to bullying.

As a teenager, Jenny Motch, 28, of Hickory, Ill., became the target of anonymous letters that called her fat and threatened her. She has her suspicions about the teens in town who might have written the letters. But even police couldn't identify the perpetrators, leaving Jenny catatonic, sentenced to sit alone at lunch with kids staring at her. The letters made her frightened, depressed and suicidal.

She did get help in college. But a decade after it happened, it still affects her.

"I feel like everything sucks and I can't do anything right. I feel like I have to be perfect."

Blanco is also still affected today, even though she spends her life counseling other victims. Recently she began therapy to help her put the pain behind her.

And she strongly believes that others who have survived years of abuse also need to find ways of healing.

"I want people who are victims, who are survivors like me, to know that if you're affected by it, you have to take it just as seriously as you would if you were abused in any other way as a child, and you need to incorporate it into whatever therapy you're doing," she says. "You have to acknowledge it."

**READERS:** Have you ever been bullied? How did you deal with it? Does it affect you now? Or have you ever been the bully? Why and is there anything someone could've done to make you stop? Share your experiences and opinions below, keeping in mind USA TODAY's community guidelines against personal attacks and hate speech.

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