

Dear Families,

The events of last week [October 24, 2014] at Marysville Pilchuck High School [Washington State] have weighed heavy on my heart. It seems wrong to simply keep on teaching, move to the next chapter, or grade another paper without saying something about what happened. In order to be sensitive to all families, I am sending this message to parents and asking you to decide whether or not to share it with your kids. I am sharing it with you.

Jaylen Fryberg made a decision to end his own life last week. Worse even, he made the decision to end others' lives, too. He used a gun to shoot Zoe, Gia, Nate, Andrew, Shaylee, and himself. He stopped multiple lives before they could be lived out. What breaks my heart is that Jaylen was under the mistaken impression that there was no path forward through his pain. He thought his freshman experiences determined everything.

The truth is much different.

Every life is a gift. Whether you are a person who believes in God or not, one thing is true: Life is precious. Every life is a story with many chapters. Imagine each year as a chapter of your life – your book – your story. Jaylen's story stops at Chapter 14. The pages are torn out, erased, and gone forever. Jaylen and his family will not experience the many chapters that were yet to be lived out. Jaylen won't meet his own children, or discover the true love of his life, or experience his greatest triumphs. He won't get to see his own story played out. His happiest moments were erased before he ever got to experience them.

Relationships in middle and high school are almost always temporary. Part of each person's journey involves winding his or her way through such relationships, feeling the positive and negative emotions (the highs and lows) that go with them, and moving forward when they change or come to an end. This doesn't mean life is over. It means life is moving forward. Jaylen missed out on every adventure planned for his future. Jaylen's victims missed out on the adventures planned for their futures. Jaylens' family is forced to live their lives without him. Their story is incomplete. They will carry the emptiness of his absence with them for the rest of their lives. Zoe and Gia's families are now living an incomplete story, too. Zoe and Gia will not experience the very best chapters of their lives. Their pages are gone, torn out and thrown away, consumed by pain and anger. Their families now carry the burden of their absence forever.

And now we wait to see if Nate, Shaylee, and Andrew will recover. We wait to see if more chapters will be erased. We pray they pull through. (Tragically, Shaylee and Andrew have died since this letter was first sent out.)

My message to young people is this: You deserve to live your life – all of it. Every chapter is priceless. Every page is beautiful. If we think of life as a story, we see that every moment – the good ones, bad ones, the highs and lows – come together to form a rich painting that becomes the tapestry of our lives. Cutting the journey short is never the answer. Removing ourselves from our own books leaves only emptiness and agony for those left behind. Taking our pain out on others is never the real solution. It may feel like the answer during particularly tough, painful moments, but I promise you it is never the right path. Don't let someone else's decisions

determine your destiny. Make a promise to yourself and your family today: **When you feel hurt, angry, lost, or hopeless, you will never lash out; instead, you will reach out.** Reaching out will lead to some of the most wonderful friendships and experiences of your life. Reaching out will move your story forward. Reaching out means your adventure continues. Reaching out means you believe the best is yet to come. It means hope is alive, and you refuse to turn your back on it.

With life comes the opportunity to leave a mark, make an impression, impact the world. Through the difficult times, we learn to appreciate the celebrations. The sweetest things in life only have meaning when compared to life's most sour moments. After all, without sour, "sweet" would be nothing but an empty word. It is the same with light. Light is especially beautiful when it shows up in the midst of darkness. Imagine yourself in a pitch black room. The darkness may seem absolutely overwhelming. It might feel like there is no way out. But then, consider what happens when a tiny match is lit. What happens to the room? Suddenly, things become visible. Signs of hope emerge. The smallest ray of light can scatter a vast landscape of darkness. Your family, friends, teachers and many others are here to help you see that light and hope are just around the corner.

There is always a reason to have hope. There are always people waiting to reach out and lift you up. Give them a chance. Don't turn to anger and hate. Say something to your teacher or knock on your mom's bedroom door or call a friend and say, "Can we talk?" I promise someone wants to listen. Someone wants to help. Your teachers will listen. They will help. Your coaches will listen and help. Your parents will listen. They will help. They love you more than they even know how to put into words. Your real friends will listen. They will help. Your life and every life around you is a gift, the most precious gift in this world. Don't let the ups and downs of growing up become something that robs you of the highest adventures and richest experiences that await you in life. And yes, they will be adventures of pain and pleasure, tears and triumph. But they are *your* adventures, and you deserve to live them out – all of them.

Warm regards,

Chad Donohue