

Kindness Matters

Former PHS teacher launches anti-bullying campaign following son's death

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The picture most people have seen of Peyton James, with his blue eyes, red hair, and piercing stare, was one of more than 100 that former PHS English teacher Jacki James took of her son that day. James had just purchased Peyton his own camera, and the two had been out all day playing with it.

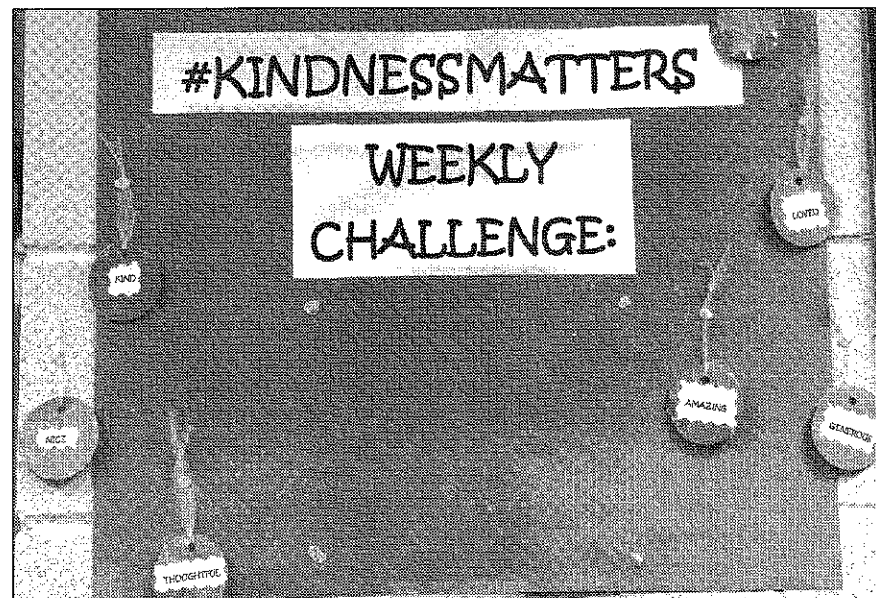
"In that picture," James said, "he's sitting on this stump, and I'm standing over him saying, 'One more, smile.' And he looks at me [with a] face that says, 'Mother, please stop taking my picture.' And it turned out beautifully. It really does capture who he is, I think."

This is one of James' favorite memories of her son, Peyton, who died by suicide last October. Peyton, who was 13, had ADHD, struggled with anxiety and depression and was bullied by his classmates for a myriad of reasons, including the color of his teeth. As an infant, Peyton spent time in the NICU (neonatal intensive care unit) due to a premature birth. The pure oxygen he received while in the NICU resulted in a yellow discoloration of his teeth.

"It looked like he had popcorn kernels stuck in his teeth, but all over," James said. "And so that's where it started. The kids were saying, 'Why are your teeth so nasty?' And then you throw in [the fact that] he had red hair, he wore glasses, he wasn't athletic, he liked to read. I called him my little nerd. The kids picked on him for that kind of thing."

James would tell her son, "You're going to be their boss someday. Just let it roll off your back." She took him to see a therapist when he started talking about "how much better everyone's lives would be without him."

"His father and I were divorced, he changed schools, he was being picked on and teased," James said. "He had a lot of cards stacked against him."



A sign in Jacki James' English classroom at East View High School displays the weekly Kindness Matters challenge. "We do something different every week," James said. "Last week was to compliment one of your friends on social media and really tell them why you like them." Photo by Madison Masters

The bullies who tormented Peyton at school—throwing rocks, tripping him up the stairs, and in one instance, shattering his eardrum—were left behind last summer when James moved her son from Round Rock to Georgetown, where James took a job teaching English at East View High School. The move was presented as a clean slate. But the tranquility didn't last long.

"The teasing started again," James said. "It wasn't so much about his appearance anymore—he had gotten really tall and had contacts—but about the things he was interested in."

Peyton would rather stay inside, engrossed in the worlds of anime, Pokémon and Minecraft, than play outside. While he found solace in these activities, some students used them as daggers to cut down his self-esteem.

On Oct. 7, he had an altercation with a boy. Peyton didn't know the boy because he was new to the school, and there weren't any video cameras, so the boy was never identified. Peyton didn't tell his mom about the incident until the next day, after he had talked to his principal.

"I think Peyton felt a little bit abandoned," James said. "He came home from school and we talked about it, and I told him the same things. 'Just ignore it. Don't worry about it. It's not that big of a deal.' And I think maybe he felt a little abandoned by me too. We'd been home about 20 minutes, and I found him."

James was lost after Peyton's death.

"My whole life, I'd only wanted to be a mother," James said. "And then I wasn't one anymore. At that moment, I couldn't see myself coming back to work, I couldn't see myself really even getting out of bed. And then Kindness Matters started."

Kindness Matters began as a hashtag and a Facebook page called "Prayers for Peyton" while Peyton was in the hospital. After he died, Kindness Matters became a way for James to reach out to friends. The Facebook page, which started with a couple hundred likes, now has more than 18,000 followers.

James also started a website (www.kindness-matters.org) through which she has sold bright orange Kindness Matters T-shirts and bracelets to people in nearly all 50 states, as well as six countries. James' next goal for the campaign is to make Kindness Matters a federally recognized non-profit organization.

"We all recognize that we could be a little bit more nice, we could be a little bit more kind to the people around us," James said. "I think that's why [Kindness Matters] has grown so much and why people have responded the way they have because it is something positive, and we don't hear enough positive in the world."

After working together in the English department at PHS for five years, James and Patricia Ansley developed a close friendship. When Ansley learned of Peyton's death, she started a fundraiser on the crowdfunding website Youcaring that raised \$1,200 for the Peyton James Memorial Fund.

"There's so many [PHS] kids who may not even be aware of what happened to her, [kids] who loved her, who cared about her deeply," Ansley said. "Even though she's not here anymore, she's still one of our own."

English teacher Rebecca Cohen, who taught next door to James last year, tries to spread the Kindness Matters message to her students.

"Her movement has inspired me to incorporate that [positivity] into my day-to-day lessons and teach students that the smallest of things can mean so much to a person," Cohen said. "You never know what a person is going through, you never know the kind of day they're having, and the tiniest bit of kindness can change everything for a person."

All of the Kindness Matters proceeds will fund a scholarship James is starting in Peyton's name for students majoring in veterinary medicine at Texas A&M.



Former PHS English teacher Jacki James holds a photo of her son Peyton, who died by suicide in October. Peyton, who had ADHD, also struggled with anxiety and depression and was bullied by his classmates. "My whole life, I'd only wanted to be a mother," James said. "And then I wasn't one anymore. At that moment, I couldn't see myself coming back to work, I couldn't see myself really even getting out of bed. And then Kindness Matters started." Photo by Madison Masters

"Texas A&M is where Peyton wanted to go to school," James said. "He wanted to be a vet. It's kind of Peyton's way of getting to go to college. He'll get to be an Aggie, which breaks my Longhorn heart."

On Jan. 16, a rally was held in downtown Georgetown to celebrate the first official Kindness Matters day. Georgetown Mayor Dale Ross, along with friends, family, and supporters of Kindness Matters, assembled to commemorate Peyton's life.

"Someone told me before, '[Kindness Matters] will give his death meaning,'" James said. "There's never going to be a meaning to it. It's never going to make sense, it's never going to be right, it's never going to have been the best thing. I will never believe that. But knowing that through Peyton I can maybe keep one other child from going through what he went through, and help one other mother not go through what I'm going through, then it gives me a little bit of purpose. It gives me a reason to get up and move forward with my life."