

THE TATTOO

THETATTOO@GMAIL.COM

MAKING A PERMANENT IMPRESSION SINCE 1994

VOLUME 11 No. 18

School hit with three deaths in freshman class

By **MINHA LEE**
The Tattoo

Leaving many classmates dwelling on painful memories, the deaths of three freshmen in one year haunted Prior Lake High School in Minnesota.

"Students lost their friends. They were grieving. Death kind of blanketed the school, especially the freshmen class," said Nancy VanHorne, the school social worker.

Superintendent Tom Westerhaus of the Prior Lake-Savage school district, last spring called it a time of "uncertainty and fear" for families in the district.

Westerhaus said he hoped that by the district moving forward, the families of the three dead boys as well others would find peace.

But peace seemed to be far out of reach for many when three deaths in one year drastically changed the atmosphere of the Prior Lake High School.

Nate Vanek, who would have been a freshman at the school last fall, died in a car accident at the end of summer vacation last year.

On the way back from a movie theater one evening, the car Vanek was in went off a curvy road. Others in the

car were hospitalized and survived, but Vanek, who was not wearing a seat belt, was not one of them. He was thrown out of the car then got rolled over.

He was pronounced dead at the scene.

According to 15-year-old Jesse McKee, Vanek was a very popular guy among his freshmen class and deeply missed. T-shirts with his last yearbook picture on them were sold to remember him by.

The overwhelming sense of grief wouldn't have hit the school as hard if Vanek's death was the only one that year.

But in March, another freshman, Brad Hoppe, committed suicide.

"He used one of his hunting shot guns," said David Tusa, 15, a freshman.

Hoppe cut off the phone lines and took off his socks to try to pull the trigger with his toes. He put the rifle to the top of his mouth and shot himself.

But a quick death with little pain wasn't how he left this world. Hoppe bled to death.

After Hoppe's death, his fellow students made ribbons out of army cam-

ouflage fabric during lunch periods. They tied them around their wrists and pinned them onto backpacks to remind them of their classmate.

Just when the tears had almost stopped flowing – and when teachers thought emergency meetings were nearly over – tragedy struck the school again.

No one was ready for another suicide.

Two weeks after Hoppe's death, Dan Krinke, another freshman, also took his own life.

"He got drunk and shot himself to death," said David Tusa, 15.

Krinke locked himself in his brother's room with a suicide note and died there.

Reluctant to glorify his death or otherwise promote suicide – and following the superintendent's suggestion – his family kept the funeral private and asked that no special memorabilia be made in Krinke's honor. They wanted his death taken seriously and to see an end to the tragedies.

Following Krinke's suicide, teary-eyed faces and blank stares became the norm at school.

Neither Hoppe nor Krinke seemed to show any signs of depression or sui-

cide to their classmates.

To David Tusa, Hoppe was "talkative" and "outgoing."

Tusa said Hoppe "talked to anyone in school."

Krinke "kind of had the same personality," Tusa said.

McKee, who was friends with Krinke, said Krinke was "usually happy and hyper."

No one seems to have noticed any signs of depression or suicidal behaviors, if there were any at all.

To many of their classmates and friends, the suicides contradicted the boys' regular personalities and characteristics.

"I was very shocked and saddened," said McKee.

Shortly after the suicides, a speaker came to the high school and talked to the students about teen depression and suicide.

Most freshmen skipped their classes that day, and teachers headed for more emergency meetings.

VanHorne said the losses took a toll on the student body and taxed the school's coping abilities.

"We were capable, to an extent," said VanHorne. "Three events in one year, any school would have trouble

dealing with that."

VanHorne said she asked herself, "What did I miss?"

Counselors, social workers, and teachers felt the heaviness of the responsibilities that their roles bring them, especially in the midst of such tragedies.

But in a school of more than 1,800 students, even the best social workers would have a hard time getting to know everyone.

Taking such tough matters personally can often be too much.

VanHorne said sometimes she has to remind herself that it also is the school's work, not only hers.

Now that the school year is over, the memory of these three lost freshmen boys will begin to fade for those who didn't know them.

That might be for the better – maybe remembrance of the dead should only go so far.

Maybe then, the suicides will be a thing of the past for those in the future of the school.

However, for those of us who not only felt, but were a part of that tragic school year, accepting our memory of our three fellow students may be our road to peace.

Four years in the high school spin cycle

By **KATIE JORDAN**
The Tattoo

Graduation was bittersweet for me. On the one hand, I finally got to say goodbye to Bristol Eastern High School.

On the other hand ... I finally had to say goodbye.

Though I'll admit I'm the first to make fun of my school and its policies, Bristol Eastern has been like my home

for the past four years.

Some people say high school doesn't matter at all in life. I don't know if I agree. But I do think that it sometimes takes leaving home to make you truly appreciate the place for all it means.

On the morning of my graduation, we had our practice-ceremony. We learned how the real ceremony would run, practiced the route we'd take down the hallway, and stood in line to purchase our \$16 caps and gowns.

The graduation garb came in little plastic bags with instructions on the "Proper Wearing Of Your Graduation Cap & Gown" on the outside. Among other essential directions, they warned of the importance of keeping the mortarboard level and advised us that "The crown should be approximately one inch above the eyebrows."

mately one inch above the eyebrows."

My favorite little tip was one that nicely sums up everything you need to know about life: "All graduates should wear the tassel on the same side for uniformity."

I think we've been a lot like mismatched clothes sloshing around together for four years.

Uniformity. Try as we might to keep things acceptably uniform, the members of my graduating class still let our true colors shine through, even at the last. From those of us geeks with too many tassels to keep those stupid mortarboards level, to the goofball who held us up by tossing around a ball in the gym where we were gathered, to the Neanderthals who jeered at unpopular kids getting their diplomas, to the guy who did a somersault when he got his – we were the same heterogeneous bunch of people we were when we showed up four years ago. Minus the dropouts, of course.

This theme was captured to some extent by the speeches made that evening. Our class president compared us to different types of movies, from action to comedy. Another student compared us to people sitting in different places on an airplane, from first class to luggage compartment. One guest speaker gave a somewhat perplexing speech about separating laundry when we get to college, the point of which was, evidently, "Don't mix the colors."

Now that I think about it, what she meant simply as a helpful hint for people who will soon have to wash their own clothes seems like a more meaningful metaphor. Maybe we are like different movies and maybe we are like airplane passengers, but I think we've been a lot like mismatched clothes sloshing around together for four years.

We're different, but we were carelessly thrown together and spun around together as we shared our halls and classrooms. And we all came out colored just a little differently by the experience. Bristol Eastern's class of 2005: We're like purple underwear. Purple underwear was about the only thing we weren't compared to that night. At the end of the evening, after speeches had been made, diplomas had been received, and pictures had been taken, we became guests on a cruise.

Each of us had been given a "passport" with our picture on it to get in to the graduation party at 10 that

night. Thanks to the efforts of parents, we found the school transformed: The cafeteria was decorated to look like places around the world, from Texas in one spot to the jungle in another.

Senior journal

The gyms were filled with all sorts of games, from an obstacle course on which you could race, to a robotic bull you could try to hang on to for as long as possible.

My friends and I decided this was definitely the most fun – if not the most exercise – any of us had ever had in the school gyms.

All through the evening I hung around with a group ranging from pot-heads to band nerds and everything in between – my motley crew of friends, my load of mismatched laundry.

I really have come out "colored differently" from the experience of sloshing around with these people for four years. From the close friends with whom I shared lunches and study halls, to the classmates and teachers with whom I spent seemingly endless hours working, the people I met in high school gave it meaning for me.

Those endless hours having come to an end at last, I want to thank these people for making my high school life such a colorful experience – and one I will not soon forget.



Tattoo photo

Good friends Katie Jordan and Joe Keo, both award-winning writers and cartoonists for *The Tattoo*, are all smiles at their June graduation from Bristol Eastern High School.

Saying goodbye in the Nebraska rain

By **ZACH BROKENROPE**
The Tattoo

"Have you ever thought about just leaving?" I ask Suzy as we sit in the back seat of Matt's car. "I mean, not telling anyone. Just getting in the damn car and leave, take nothing and don't look back."

"You have no idea how many times I've thought about it..." she says, after a moment. "But, I think there's a part inside everyone that stops you right before you do it, a moment of reality."

"That's the whole point of it though, you don't think about it! Hell, isn't that the whole point of being a teenager? You do the stupid stuff now when you're allowed to be an idiot – then later on, you're supposed to be an adult."

"Most people worry too much about other stuff they have to do," she says.

"If we were able to, right now, would you go with me?" I ask, turning my head and looking at her. She pauses for a moment.

"Yes ... and I wouldn't look back."

It's a Thursday night and school's been out for about two weeks, but I couldn't find a way to end this column.

For the past year it's been my confessional, and as I have changed, so has my writing, I think. So I had to wait for the right event, the final story I will share. Tonight I found it, in the middle of an open field.

Nebraska is known for its extreme weather. When it's hot, it can reach the low 100s easily, and when it's cold it can easily be negative. When it's dry, the crumbling layers of dirt can dance like fallen leaves. And when it rains, it rains enough to make you drown in life.

It had been raining since 7 a.m., hard and brutal in large droplets that pounded the ground. And here we were, 10 at night and driving down a country road in Matt's new car, a Nissan with a stick shift.

For the past year Matt has pretty much been the main driver for those of us not old enough to drive and Chris, who sat next to him in the front, is the same age but doesn't drive very much. Suzy and I sit in the back.

Suzy is perhaps the coolest girl I know, in all honesty. She's one of the few skater/punk/emo girls in our school and doesn't get excited over anything. She's also infamous in our school for her outspoken political views; at one point yelling expletives about the president at our lunch table while standing up

waving a bread stick. If this isn't enough, she also happens to be the object of affection for most of the guys in our school.

Five minutes earlier we had been sitting at Suzy's house watching TV when Matt shut it off.

"You know we should really go out to Pioneer Trails and watch the lightning," he said randomly. That's the thing about being a teenager, even when you plan something it still has the opportunity to end completely different.

Pioneer Trails is the local make-out spot in our community, about five miles outside of city limits and secluded behind a row of trees. Officially it's a "wildlife refuge" but in reality it's nothing more than a small man-made lake, an old dam, and a field for parking.

We had quietly snuck out of the house, careful for her Dad of the house, careful for her Dad when it comes to where she's going, but Suzy has a wild streak no one can stop.

Ten minutes later we were stepping out of the car and onto the soft dirt, rain pounding our bodies and lightning brightening the black night.

"This one's gonna be loud," Chris says as we climb on the roof of the car. A few seconds earlier, a gigantic flash had illuminated the sky, and we were just waiting for the following thunder.

"Naw, not too bad," Matt says. Immediately after this, a thunderous roar erupts in the air, shaking the car windows. There's nothing quite like thunder that moves you.

"When I was little, I used to think thunder was God bowling," I say. It's cold; the wind is blowing and the driving rain is drenching us.

"I don't believe in God," Chris says somberly. Lightning and then a clap of thunder.

"Do you ever feel like you have so many emotions inside of you, you're gonna burst?" Suzy says out of nowhere. "Like you just can't handle the world around you and you just want to go crazy?"

"Every moment of my life..." I say, as the thunder drowns out my word. Suzy jumps off the car and looks toward the sky.

the freshman diaries

In one swift breath, she pierced the sky with a resounding scream.

Seconds later I join her, then Chris and Matt. Thirty seconds later we're quiet.

"That felt good," I say, as we get back into the car.

If my freshman year were a movie, this would be the last scene, so this is where I leave you. We're driving back into Aurora, wet and cold, our hair plastered to our flushed faces, our clothes clinging to our bodies.

We don't speak, the music plays on the radio and I know this much in life: My name is Zach Brokenrope, I am 15 years old, I don't know exactly where I'm going in life or what's going to happen, but I plan on living it to the fullest, every damn second.



Justin Skaradosky / The Tattoo

WWW.READTHETATTOO.COM

The best teen journalism in the world. For questions, comments or to join, contact advisors Steve Collins and Jackie Majerus at (860)523-9632.