

POKIN AROUND: Not the path she chose, but the one she's determined to follow

By [Steve Pokin](#)

Saturday, October 24, 2009

It's not the life Tina Meier wanted. No parent ever wants to lose a child. But it's the path she's been placed on, and the one she will follow.

She is determined to make something good out of something horrible, traveling the country like a prophet, warning middle and high schoolers and their parents that when you bring the world to your laptop or cell phone you can open the digital door to those who wish to do you harm.

As news of her daughter's 2006 suicide fades, Meier no longer talks to the likes of Katie Couric, Diane Sawyer or Dr. Phil. The venues are gymnasiums and libraries in towns, large and small, across the nation.

Armed with her laptop and Power Point presentation, Meier has urged children to not only beware, but to act with greater kindness toward others.

"If I walked away and stopped I would feel like I failed," she says. "So many other families go through this every single day ... I don't feel like some heroic person who is doing something amazing. I am doing what I feel I have to do."

This month she spoke to students and parents in New Jersey and North Carolina. She has been invited to Anti Defamation League gatherings. On Wednesday she addressed sixth-graders at Jefferson Middle School in St. Charles and returned to meet parents. On Tuesday she's at Fox Middle School in Arnold.

Seventh-graders in Torrington, Conn., are conducting bake sales to raise money to bring Meier to their school this winter, says teacher Angelo Calabrese. The two girls leading the effort had heard about Megan's death and the MySpace hoax surrounding it.

Megan Meier was 13 when she took her life after a boy she befriended on MySpace suddenly was mean to her. The boy's name was Josh Evans. Tina and her husband Ron (they have since divorced) discovered weeks later that Josh did not exist. Instead, he was created by a neighbor, Lori Drew, and Drew's daughter, then 13, as well as an 18-year-old. They created the phony account to see if Megan was saying mean things about Sarah.



[ROY SYKES](#) PHOTO -- Tina Meier chats with sixth-graders after her talk.

A Los Angeles jury found Drew guilty of misdemeanor charges, but the federal judge overturned the convictions. The trial was in California because MySpace has headquarters there.

At Jefferson Middle School, sixth-graders troop into the gym and sit tightly packed on bleachers. Meier wears a black-and-white polka-dot blouse and matching necklace. Megan favored polka dots.

Meier explains her daughter had attention deficit with hyperactivity disorder. She tells students Megan suffered from depression and was called a "fat cow" in school because she was overweight.

Meier covers not only cyberbullying but old-fashioned bullying, too. She tells the boys they probably like to punch others they see as weaker, or different, and call them "fag, queer and homo."

The spoken slurs cause a ripple of nervous laughter. By the time Meier covers the events preceding her daughter's suicide it is deathly quiet and some students look to be near tears.

It is a story Meier has told many times, including from the witness stand in Los Angeles.

Later that afternoon, at Meier's mother's house, we sit at the table where I first heard the story in 2007.

Is it any easier, emotionally, to relate the story of your daughter's death?

"I have to put Megan deep inside of me," she says. "When I talk about it, if I talked about what Megan really means to me I would cry through the entire thing.

"I don't think it's a bad thing to let them see that it affects you. It's your baby."

The Megan Meier Foundation was created in December 2007 by Vicki Dunn, Tina's aunt, of St. Peters. The purpose is to educate children, parents and teachers about the Internet's dangers and bullying. The foundation has an eight-person board and has had one fundraiser, a golf tournament that raised \$7,000.

The foundation in action, basically, is Meier. At the end of her talks she encourages e-mails, and she is the person who responds. She hears regularly from children and parents about bullying and cyberbullying and recently was contacted by an Illinois family that asked for her emotional support after their child committed suicide after being bullied. Meier says there are bullied children who commit suicide across the country without an iota of media attention.

Meier left her career as a real estate agent when Megan died. She began to take a monthly salary of \$2,000 from the foundation in March. Her fees generally are \$750 to talk to students locally - or \$1,000 with an added parents' presentation. It's \$2,000 for talks outside the St. Louis area, plus expenses.

Meier also works part time for her aunt. This is the job that provides medical insurance. Dunn says Meier's salary from the foundation is misleading, because when there's no money there's no salary.

Meier spoke a year ago at Jefferson, says Principal Kim Harris. The sixth-grade teachers - who guard their instructional time dearly - voted unanimously to bring her back, she says.

That evening, Meier meets with a dozen parents who sit on blue plastic chairs in the library. She focuses on how parents can learn about the Internet and monitor their child's computer activity.

She refers parents, for example, to netlingo.com, which provides definitions for text-speak: RU/18 means Are you over 18?; RUH means Are you horny?; and PLOS means Parents Looking Over Shoulder.

Meier covers sexting, which is the sending via cell phone of nude or partially nude pictures and videos. She then tells the story of Jessica Logan, of Ohio, who in 2008 texted nude photos of herself to her boyfriend. They broke up and the boy sent the photos to friends. Jessica killed herself at 18.

Those who forward nude images, Meier says, might not realize they can be charged with distributing child pornography, depending on the age of the person in the photo.

She advises parents to occasionally pick up their child's cell phone and look at the photos and to join Facebook or MySpace and view their child's page, as well as their friends' pages.

Parents also have the option of installing software that can track and monitor their child's computer use, or filter out undesirable sites. "It's your house and it is under your roof," she says.

Meier recommends websites such as www.netnanny.com.

Parent Jenny Linson, who has two children, ages 9 and 11, says she gleaned valuable information from the presentation. She attended Meier's 2008 talk, as well. "Last year I heard Tina tell the whole story. Now I need more of the netnanny information."

[Steve Pokin](#) is a columnist for the Suburban Journals. He can be reached at spokin@yourjournal.com or by phone at 636-946-6111, ext. 239. An audio version of the column is on the Journal website, under videos, at suburbanjournals.stltoday.com/stcharles.

<http://suburbanjournals.stltoday.com/articles/2009/10/24/stcharles/news/1025stc-pokin0.txt>