



« HER »
BULLY
« PULPIT »

Emily Torchiana had been hijacked. The cyberbullies had taken everything she was, everything she had, and dropped her off in a dark, lonely place. But in that place she found a powerful voice - and she's using it to stand up to cyberbullies everywhere and to show people like herself that they are not alone.

WORDS: ALICIA LUTZ '98 / IMAGES: DIANA DEAUER

THE BOY IN THE CORNER IS PUNCHING THE WALL. THE GIRL IN THE HALL IS SCREAMING OBSCENITIES. THE BODY WITH THE SCARS IS RUNNING OUT OF FLESH. AND THE HATE BEHIND THE CROSSED ARMS IS GROWING HOMICIDAL. NOBODY WANTS TO BE HERE.

It's not exactly a dream destination, a place you strive to get to. But you don't stumble upon places like this, either. There's something that steers you here along the way.

And so, looking around at the other patients, at *herself*, Emily Torchiana can't help but wonder: *How did I get here?*

She admitted: She didn't feel safe. Traffic and trees smeared outside her mother's 4Runner window as they barreled down the I-76 emergency lane, hazard lights confirming the crisis.

She knew: She was no longer in control. Medical scrubs and doctor's jackets swarmed around her, pulling her away from her mother, sucking her into a tiny room, sticking her with needles and capturing her vitals. They identified her by code (she didn't recognize it, but she could tell it wasn't good).

She worried: She had nothing left. They stripped her of everything she knew - from her shoelaces and her bracelets to her clothes and her cell phone - in exchange for a thin cotton hospital gown that didn't tie in the back.

Because she couldn't be trusted with the strings. She couldn't be trusted with her life. She couldn't be left alone - not even to use the bathroom.

"Go right ahead," the nurse said, nodding at the exposed toilet in the middle of the room. "We'll be right here watching."

Emily Torchiana had always loved an audience. She'd always been comfortable in front of a crowd - always assumed the people out there were as excited about her performance as she was.

"It never once occurred to Emily that she wasn't at performance level for something," laughs Emily's father, Greg Torchiana, recalling Emily's ("at least weekly") performances. "Whatever she was into, there was always a show, and we were the built-in audience - and the stagehand or whatever else she needed."

The Torchiana family is nothing if not supportive, though. They'd follow one another from basketball game to volleyball match and then back home to play backyard baseball, discuss the day around the dinner table and help each other with school projects. Emily's shows were another opportunity for family bonding.

"Sitting through all the different shows and either laughing hysterically at the stuff she was doing or just trying not to laugh because she didn't want us to - those are great memories," says Greg, smiling. "She was the one of our kids who wanted to do *everything* and thought she *could*. Whatever it was, she poured herself into it."

The four Torchiana children were spread out in age, with Emily third in the lineup. She was more like her brothers than her older

sister - she'd take Pokémon and sports over Barbie dolls and makeup any day. She had conviction like her mom, determination like her father and confidence like no other.

"Out of the four kids, Emily was the one who never recognized there were boundaries to what anyone could do or become - she never saw any limit to what she could do. She never saw any limit to what *anyone* could do," says Greg. "She thought everyone was as enthusiastic as she was - and as loving as she was. She really had the mindset of: 'They're going to treat me the way I treat them - why wouldn't they?'"

They were saying she was a whore. That she didn't have any friends. They told her to kill herself - that she should take her own life.

Emily sat in the Torchianas' dark basement, completely alone but for this growing force that the family's Windows desktop computer had become. She'd folded herself up in front of the screen's glow and watched herself slowly be redefined.

Everything had changed since she started high school. It was hard enough for the self-proclaimed tomboy to leave all her friends and start at this all-girls school. But home felt lonely, too: Her older brother and sister were away at college, she had stopped hanging out with her younger brother and she was sharing her feelings with her mom less and less.

The enthusiastic, sensitive, athletic, determined, trusting, confident and Golden Rule-abiding girl had withered. Facing the computer monitor's light, the old Emily barely cast a shadow.

"Facebook and this video chatting thing called OoVoo were new then, and it was really big, so that's what we'd do - just talk to the webcam and then post the videos to each other's Facebook walls," recalls Emily. "It's so weird, looking back, but at the time it was normal."

Normal to post a video on a friend's wall teasing that her school would beat his at the basketball game that night. Normal. Harmless. But, Emily understates: "It became bigger than that."

That video led to another: a repost of the original with commentary deriding Emily, mocking what was nothing but a simple exchange between friends. It didn't make sense, but neither did what followed: a fake Facebook profile meant not just to slander Emily's character and torment her thoughts, but to dismantle her very identity.

"I was super confused," she says: *What is this? Who are these people? Why are all the posts about me, all the pictures about me, all the videos about me?*

Whoever was behind it knew exactly what to say, playing into the teenager's growing self-consciousness about her looks and body ("Do you ever brush your teeth?" "You're so fat!"). And they attacked her values, too.

"They knew I was saving sex for marriage, but they continued saying that I was a whore and in everyone's pants," says Emily. "They were ripping apart something that has always been a big moral for me, and people were starting to believe what they were saying."

As the Facebook profile grew, old friends from middle school turned their backs on her ("I can't believe you became such a slut," they texted). There were 10-20 posts a day and more than 1,000 followers by the time Emily was blocked from the page. But not

having access to the page only made it worse. For three years, she was bombarded by even more hateful, more libelous Facebook messages, voicemails and texts - sometimes as many as 20 a day. Not to mention the constant (perhaps obsessive) tug at her curiosity: *What are they saying about me now?*

The digital torment had permeated real life. She couldn't escape. The not knowing, the distrust, consumed her. Every day Emily sat among her classmates wondering which one had sent the last vicious message - which *ones* wanted her to die. Never mind who started the onslaught at this point: Who's contributing to it? Continuing it? Aware of it? *Silent about it?*

No one asked her if she was OK, how she was doing, or if she needed a friend. And, by the time she discovered who was originally responsible (four or so of her "best friends"), it was too late - she was already gone, isolated.

Emily had shut everyone out - shut herself off. And she was shutting down.

E mily's not herself lately. She's a teenage girl - a dramatic teenage girl. She's always been so sensitive. Emily's going through a phase. She doesn't like her new school. She misses her old friends. Her best friend is dying of cancer.

Julia had a brain tumor the size of a grapefruit. One week Emily was confiding in her, the next she was visiting her in the hospital. ("Her symptoms went from zero to 100 in a day's time," Emily says.)

Still, Emily visited her friend every weekend. Every weekend, she wished it were her lying there instead of Julia. *She's fighting for her life, and I'm plotting to end mine.*

"Emily was so sweet - she was her same self in that room every weekend, but then she would walk out in the hallway afterward, and it was like, *oh my God*, it just *tore* her heart out every single weekend," says Greg. In retrospect: "It had all collided: *My gosh, I have this friend that's fighting for her life, and then there's all these people that wish I wasn't even here. We didn't even know that side.*"





All they knew was that Emily was moody, a little withdrawn. When she wasn't upstairs in her room or downstairs in the basement, her eyes were on her phone and her headphones were on her ears. Nobody knew *what* was on her mind.

"We knew she wasn't happy, but we attributed it to a thousand different things," says Greg. "I think you rationalize things as parents because it makes more sense to you to put it into a category versus making it something unique."

As Emily's older brother Greg Torchiana Jr. puts it, "We had no background to base it on. We didn't have the vocabulary for this."

But there is a word for what Emily was experiencing: *cyberbullying*.

Cyberbullying: That's how Emily Torchiana got to the point of wanting to die, of wanting to take her own life - of attempting suicide three times.

Cyberbullying: That's how she got to the bathroom floor, passed out in her own vomit - bottles of painkillers emptied out around her.

Cyberbullying: That's what led her to psychiatric hospitalization, to questioning her sanity, to wondering who she was.

And how do we get out of this place?

Emily Torchiana couldn't believe she'd gotten that far - that she'd almost caused the same pain that was weighing down the crowd before her. She was stunned by the emotional surge - so much so that she only knew she'd finished speaking because of the applause.

She choked a little on the lump growing in her throat as she took in all the faces - the mothers, fathers, siblings, friends, the co-workers, cousins, grandparents, the people who'd lost someone they loved to suicide. And, as a microphone was passed from one to the next, she heard 350 names of 350 people who had killed themselves.

"I am so happy no one had to say your name today," a woman whispered in Emily's ear, her embrace revealing the sob heaving in her chest.

Emily froze at the thought of her family holding one another as some suicide survivors spoke about the path depression took them down, how they got out alive. She could see her family's hands tremble as they took the microphone and hear the catch in the voices of her mother, her father, her sister, her older brother, her little brother, her friends as they each said it: *Emily Torchiana*.

That woman's whisper made an impression. It turned the mirror outward for a change, pivoting her perspective.

Her talk at the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: Out of the Darkness Walk in Charleston's Hampton Park last fall was the first she'd given to people who'd lost someone to suicide. It was an audience the junior psychology major hadn't anticipated facing. But there she was - just four years after almost being lost to suicide herself.

"I didn't get the depth of leaving people behind until that moment - I don't think I'd realized in any real, rational way how heartbreaking it would be for all my friends and family," Emily says. "I am so glad my family never had to read the letters I wrote them."

She'd come a long way since she sat down to write the personalized suicide letters for each member of her family - to

tell her little brother how much she regretted shutting him out: "I pushed myself away from the one I was closest with, and I know you're going to grow up to be amazing and I wish I could have seen it."

To apologize to her sister: "I'm sorry I haven't checked in with you at college, but I am so proud to be your little sister."

And to her older brother: "I do look up to you, and I'm really sorry that I couldn't stay as strong as you."

To her parents, she apologized for being "a burden" to what was otherwise the perfect family: "Don't put any blame on yourself. There was nothing that you could have done."

Ah, but there was. And, sweet Emily, they did.

"When Emily couldn't fake it anymore, and it just all fell apart, we're like, 'You know what, something is happening with you,'" recalls Emily's father. "And that's when her mom and I got the family together and said, 'OK, so, obviously this isn't just Emily being sensitive. There's something really seriously wrong here.' And subsequent to that, it got so much easier, because we could start to lay out a way to move forward."

The plan moving forward started with the inpatient psychiatric unit at Bryn Mawr Hospital in Philadelphia and moved to the intensive outpatient program at American Day Treatment Center - where for nine hours every day for four weeks, Emily joined nine other girls in group therapy, writing therapy, art therapy and so on.

"I remember thinking I was in a movie because there were girls saying they'd tried to kill other people," Emily says. "I remember just being like, *I know I need the help, but I also feel like I'm crazy in this room. I should be at the beach with friends ... but I don't have friends*. My mind was in both places: *You need the help, but also: I feel like this is making me crazy*."

At that point she'd been diagnosed with depression and social anxiety and, unofficially, an addiction to social media - the treatment for which (refraining from cell phone and computer use) proved difficult.

"I was just like someone with alcohol or drugs - you feel like you need it, you get a high from it and then you feel so bad after," says Emily, who would sneak off in the middle of the night looking for a computer. "I was very much addicted to it. I could not be without my phone. I needed to see what everyone was doing all the time."

Despite the social media withdrawals during her treatment, Emily *loved* her time at American Day: "In the mental hospital, those were the best weeks of my life!"

"She loved it so much - she talks about it *all the time*," says Noa Levin, who knew she and Emily would be best friends the moment they met outside the elevator at Liberty Street Residence Hall their first week at the College. "I was like, *Oh my gosh, she's so funny*. I had this instant 'I want to be your friend' feeling. She just seemed very easygoing, funny and almost carefree."

Emily had come to the College of Charleston straight out of outpatient psychiatric treatment. And people were seeing her as *carefree*?

"The College of Charleston was a fresh start for me," shrugs Emily, who immediately joined 20 clubs, served as a freshman senator for the Student Government Association and rushed the sorority Alpha Delta Pi. "I had put on a mask to cover everything up."



And who can blame her? Who doesn't want a second chance to fit in? She got along with everyone and found a special bond with her first-year roommate, Kelly Fields. They were "diehard fans" of 18+ nights at Boone's on King Street. They ate a lot of pizza. They kept a messy (even "kind of gross") room. They made silly videos of themselves (e.g., dancing to Justin Bieber songs) and posted them to Facebook.

The Facebook video that had started the torrent of unwelcome comments in high school never came up. Cyberbullying never came up. Neither did the path it had taken Emily down, the suicide attempts, the hospitalization. So, of course, she wouldn't mention that she'd taken the issue to local schools.

"I kind of snuck around my freshman year," says Emily, who started emailing schools in the Charleston area early in her first semester. "I really wanted to give middle schoolers some firsthand information about cyberbullying, because you always hear about it in schools, but no one ever really thinks it happens."

And, so, when Charleston Day School invited her to come talk to their seventh and eighth graders, she jumped on it.

"Where are you going? Why do you look so nice?" Kelly wanted to know when Emily was leaving to give her first talk.

"I'm just going to church," Emily told her.

"And then I was gone for a few hours while I spoke (very poorly) about cyberbullying," Emily laughs about that first talk. "I talked a little bit about my story, but not that much, so it was just this random girl talking about cyberbullying facts."

Regardless, she made an impression on her audience: They remembered her a month or so later when she walked by the school's playground with Noa and Kelly.

"They were all yelling, 'Emily! Emily!' and hugging her," recalls Noa. "We had no idea how they knew her."

And Emily wasn't telling them - not until she stood up and told her story to the College community the following year. She'd been selected as a presenter for the College's "Journey of Understanding" series, which was announced via campuswide email: Emily Torchiana will be speaking about her experience with cyberbullying, depression, anxiety, PTSD as well as her "suicide attempts" and "time in a treatment facility." Her secret was out.

"It was really shocking, because nobody knew any of this," says Kelly.

And everyone, it seems, wanted to know more: The presentation room in the Robert Scott Small Building was packed - people lined the walls, even taking up posts in the outside lobby.

"There were so many tears," says Noa. "Here's this girl who seems so put together - she has so many things going for her - but she has this affecting her daily life: this story. People really reacted to that."

"At first I definitely was scared to be known as the mental health girl on campus," says Emily. "But now I'm realizing I'm OK if I'm seen as this girl that's dealing with all this stuff, because I'm waking up every morning and getting out of bed, I'm walking to class confidently. So maybe I'm known as the girl that has mental illnesses, but I'm also the girl that is dealing with the mental illnesses positively."

Emily's speaking career took off after that first talk on campus - and continues to grow steadily.

"I think it is really therapeutic for me to share my story," says Emily. "The stigma of mental illness keeps people quiet - and



that's the worst thing for them. By telling my story, I'm giving people an opportunity to tell theirs. I'm showing them that they're not alone."

That's the message she leaves with every audience she addresses: You're not alone.

"Put your hand on your chest," she says at the end of each talk. "Do you feel that? That's purpose. You're here for a reason. You're alive for a reason. You matter. Nothing in this world would be the same if you weren't in it - all the people you've met would be affected. You're never alone."

Emily knows that dark place of isolation. And sometimes that kind of understanding sheds enough light to guide us out.

It was still dark out when she got to the Ravenel Bridge. She'd been walking for hours - zigzagging the peninsula on such an unpredictable route even her thoughts couldn't possibly follow.

And even if they could, they'd be drowned out by the Sia lyrics blaring through her ear buds:

I have lost myself again.

Lost myself and I am nowhere to be found.

She hadn't planned to go to the bridge. But what better place to be alone, to even out her emotional spikes, to get some perspective?

If nothing else, the wind lashing at her - stinging tears out of her eyes, tangling knots through her hair, billowing her shirt, whipping her skirt around her legs - would temper her emotions a little.

Hold me, wrap me up, unfold me.

I am small and needy.

Warm me up.

Alone at the top, Emily folded herself up, hugging her shins tightly to brace against the cold. She kept her head down and sobbed into her knees.

When she looked up next, the sun had started to rise, warming the horizon up for the day and letting in just enough light for her to read the words carved into the railing in front of her: *You would be missed.*

She stared, shivered off a chill. Eyes still steady, she took out her ear buds (they were now blasting Eminem). The world was telling her something - and, for the first time ever, she was ready to hear it. It was time to turn around.

The night before Emily was at the top of the bridge, she'd been at the very bottom. She had lost the Student Government Association presidency election, and the post-traumatic stress disorder she was diagnosed with last fall had knocked her down hard.

She'd plummeted right back into the torments of high school: *No one likes you. You're a failure. You are nothing. Everyone is against you.* With every flashback, she was stuck in yet another of the very worst cyberbullying moments - all at once and one after another - and she could feel the agony, the stab of every word they'd made.

"It was hard to see," says Noa, who had seen the effect PTSD has on Emily before - the first time being when the cyberbullies back home sent a Snapchat giving Emily the middle finger and started commenting on her college Facebook photos. "I was so thrown off because I saw how much it affected her and how it can trigger the PTSD like that. It's very scary."



The PTSD explained Emily's nightmares, intense flashbacks to high school and anxiety triggered by Facebook notifications and the likes. The diagnosis and exposure therapy she's gotten have helped her handle the symptoms - whether brought on by the cyberbullies chiming in on her life or the people she counted on for support letting her down. She continues to improve.

"I can definitely see the difference of how Emily would have overcome losing the election freshman year compared to how she overcame it now. I don't think she would have built herself back up as easily as she did," says Noa, adding, "I was actually surprised how strongly she got past it."

Of course, that horrible sense of failure and the resulting onslaught of traumatic images, thoughts and feelings had led Emily to the top of the bridge, where she opened her eyes to the message: "You would be missed."

It was a turning point. She was ready to move on.

The next weekend, Emily went to Atlanta and spoke at the Southeastern Panhellenic Conference: Leading with Purpose - the largest conference for collegiate women in the United States. There, she told 1,300 people the truth: "My struggle isn't over. I'm a work in progress."

"I was honest, and it was by far the best speech I have given," says Emily, who has since received more than 100 messages from people in that audience, saying it was the best talk they'd ever heard, that it made a difference in their lives. "It was really humbling and reassuring knowing that I was able to help those listening."

That's why Emily does this: to help people like the girl who messaged her after that speech and said she'd planned to commit suicide the day of the conference: "Honestly, you're the reason I'm alive right now." Or to help the people who read her blog: "I thought about killing myself and I read your blog and realized it can get better." Or to answer when someone calls from the top of the Ravenel Bridge and isn't sure they'll make it back down alive: She saved that life, too.

"She actually has an impact on the world, and I think she's understanding that more and more as she speaks," says Noa. "She's really grown into her own."

"Just seeing her walk around campus - she seems so much prouder now," agrees Laura Kuroki, who shared a few classes with Emily in high school, but had never heard the rumors or seen the Facebook profile - and the two didn't become close until college. "She's walking her genuine walk now."

"For the first time since before the bullying, I am really genuinely happy to be alive," attests Emily. "I am happy with where I am in my life."

Her family is, too: "Where she is in her progression and her success - how she's turned this around: We're really proud of that," her father says. "Our biggest hope for her is that she doesn't stop improving - that she's never looking back, she's only looking forward."

And she has a lot to look forward to. As her friend Laura says, "Emily dreams big - really, really big."

After she graduates next year, she wants to take a few months for "me time" in Hawaii before she pursues her graduate degree in either forensic psychology or clinical psychology. She's begun

writing a book and researching young adult publishing houses that can get her story out to a wider audience. And, of course, she will continue expanding her speaking career.

"I am able to talk about my mental issues in the present tense rather than say I am over them now, and I think that shows growth," she says, adding that she is happiest when she finds out one of her talks has impacted a life. "If I could continue that as a job, I don't think anything else would make me happier."

Those goals, of course, are all secondary to personal goals of self-improvement. She's working on self-image, trust and keeping her emotions in check. She's coming along: recording good moments in journals, reaching out to her support network and "positively changing my thoughts. ... For the first time I am putting myself and my health first."

"I can tell that she's learning to not be emotionally reactive to triggers. I can tell she's got the mental fortitude to reflect on these things, and that makes me proud of her," says her brother Greg. "If sharing her story helps her talk about it when something else happens in life, it's all right with me. There's always going to

"I THINK THERE'S A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HOLDING ONTO YOUR PAST AND LEARNING FROM IT. I DON'T DWELL ON BEING BULLIED OR FEEL SORRY FOR MYSELF - I'VE USED IT TO BE A BETTER PERSON. EVEN THOUGH I STILL GO THROUGH ROUGH TIMES, WHAT DOESN'T KILL YOU MAKES YOU STRONGER, AND I AM A MUCH STRONGER PERSON."

- EMILY TORCHIANA

be some stress in life, and if she can talk about it, then I feel like that's good. If it helps her cope with a difficult situation, that is what matters."

Besides, how Emily got here doesn't matter anymore.

"I think there's a difference between holding onto your past and learning from it. I don't dwell on being bullied or feel sorry for myself - I've used it to be a better person," she says. "Even though I still go through rough times, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, and I am a much stronger person."

She has reclaimed her identity. She's telling her own story now. She's using what almost killed her to save lives. The cyberbullies gave her a powerful voice, and she's using it to move forward - to help herself and others get ahead of all the cyberbullies out there.

Emily is right where she wants to be. 📍