

AT WHAT COST...

One year ago today on September 8, 2015 my son “Pasha” almost killed himself from self-inflicted lacerations (from a serrated hunting knife) on his arms. I found him in the early morning hours of that day barely responsive with blood all over him and the boy’s bathroom. Holding him upright in my arms while applying direct pressure to his gaping wounds I was yelling at him to stay with us and that help was on the way. At the same time I was trying to wash the blood off him looking for other cuts while continuing to not let him go.

In what seemed like seconds and at the same time hours Woodbury Police and Paramedics arrived. A paramedic took over for me and started their emergency trauma care protocol. Pasha was then transported by ambulance to Regions Hospital emergency. Fortunately, primarily due to the care and treatment provided by first responders and emergency doctors, Pasha did not suffer any permanent internal injuries. Our family will be forever grateful to those involved for all that they did that day.

I wish we could say the same about South Washington County Schools (SWCS). The best way to describe their response is maliciously reprehensible.

SWCS refused to even meet with us to discuss Pasha’s injuries and mental health until a judge forced them to. At that meeting school staff didn’t say anything until the very end when a district special education supervisor said there was no need to change or revise Pasha’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

We adopted Pasha when he was almost 4-years-old. He had been severely neglected and physically abused before being taken by Russian authorities and placed in an orphanage. Pasha was diagnosed with multiple developmental disabilities included Emotional Behavior Disorder. He has an IEP since he entered St. Paul Schools and then SWCS in 6th grade.

With the help of dedicated teachers, staff, and coaches Pasha made great progress over the years and was now looking forward to pursuing a career as a fitness trainer. He had started wrestling varsity for Woodbury High School (WHS) as an 8th grader. He was on Woodbury’s first ever section championship team and during his senior year was the 2015 individual sections champion at 220 lbs. His accomplishments, most assuredly, were because of his coaches and the extracurricular activities he was first introduced to and actively encouraged by the same coaches.

Because of his developmental disabilities and IEP Pasha was being enrolled in the districts Next Step program for school year 2015/16. Next Step is supposed to assist special needs students in transitioning from secondary to post-secondary academics and/or vocational opportunities. For us it was the beginning of the malicious and vindictive campaign of terror instigated by SWCS against Pasha and our family.

It is no coincidence that Pasha did what he did that day last year. You see it was supposed to be his first day at Next Step. However he didn’t want to go because Next Step was refusing to allow him to pursue his ambition of being a trainer. This had got to the point where we had

earlier filed due process proceedings against SWCS. Tragically for us the numerous issues we brought forward against the district had not yet been resolved by then.

Since Pasha's near-death the district has accused us amongst other things of making up Pasha's injuries, fabricating photos Pasha had taken that night and uploaded on social media, that we were no longer Pasha's parents, that this was Pasha's fault, threatened us with legal action and arrest, that his injuries were never life-threatening, making Pasha volunteer as an "adult" instead of a "student" with the wrestling team, and "banning" me from school property and from communicating with school officials; while continuing to resist, impede, oppose, and interfere with any effort we make to get him the education he is legally and morally entitled to.

Since we filed our due process case last year the District has spent in excess of \$200,000 in legal fees (in records obtained under the MN Data Practices Act) with that amount significantly increasing as we now approach our due process trial date in early October of this year.

All of this fighting against our so-called "demands" of (1) having a suicide response plan included in Pasha's IEP; (2) allowing Pasha to intern with a school physical education teacher or strength coordinator; (3) allowing Pasha to participate in an early morning weight training and conditioning program at WHS that he had been going to since he was in middle school; and (4) providing Pasha with social skills, interpersonal communications, and expressive language instruction.

I debated over and over again whether to write about this. It's still not easy to talk about and very few nights pass where I still don't instinctively wake up and check to see if Pasha is alright. I also considered the societal stigma associated with suicide, and how survivors are often ostracized and even embarrassed, before ultimately realizing it was important to tell Pasha's Story; not only for us as a family, but for other parents who maybe after hearing what happened to us will not have to endure the suffering that has become such a disheartening part of our daily lives. Of course the final decision was Pasha's and I couldn't be prouder of him for deciding that this is bigger than us and our community needs to know what happened.

Of further note, I for one will carefully review any future District referendums as it is quite clear that if SWCS can spend the amount of monies they have fighting against Pasha it is not a matter of the District not having enough funds – it is a matter of the District properly prioritizing the spending of funds they already have.

Lastly, Pasha's story isn't just about him, or special education students, this could happen tomorrow to any one of us having children enrolled in SWCS. After the number of student suicides we have had in our district, and the suicide attempts we know and don't know about, our family had expected and rightfully deserved far more than the condescending and deliberately malicious indifference afforded us by SWCS. Is this really what we as parents, a community, and society should expect of and dare I say have forced upon us by our public schools?

Steve, Kate, Toly and Pavel "Pasha" Swensen; Woodbury, MN