Going from outsider to Boise High Hall of Famer

A 1986 grad dedicates her life to helping teens combat the bullying she endured as a youth.

BY TIANA TOZER
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I've spent a lot of time in my life asking, "Why me?" Usually it's when something bad happens. It's rare that I ask the question when something good happens. But when I was told I would be inducted into the Boise High School Hall of Fame, I asked, "Why me?"

In high school I was a wanna-be and in reality a nobody. I was only in one Advanced Placement class — English — so I didn't really qualify as a smart kid. I played basketball but wasn't accepted as a jock and was relegated to the fringes of the team. I was a farm kid from the East side (most of the farm kids were from the

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Although Tiana Tozer wasn't bullied in high school as she was in junior high, she nonetheless felt like an outcast.

Provided by Tiana Tozer

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West side, out by Meridian) who had to get up and milk the goats at 5 every morning. I wanted so badly to fit in and be included, but I was different, and although I had friends, my junior high and high school days were filled with lessons of exclusion and survival.

Boise High Hall of Fame candidates are people who have made significant contributions to the state of Idaho, the United States or the world. So what have I accomplished? I became disabled at age 20 when an intoxicated driver ran a stop sign. Since then I've fought for .08 laws in Idaho, Illinois and Nevada, shared my story with hundreds of young people, encouraged young people to make responsible choices, and volunteered with Mothers Against Drunk Driving for more than 10 years.

Tiana Tozer
Rire, ca fait s'en aller la douleur.

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I was a member of the USA Women's Wheelchair Basketball Team for six years, and I helped my team bring home the silver medal from Barcelona and the bronze from Atlanta in the Paralympic Games.

I lobbied for the Americans with Disabilities Act. As a humanitarian aid worker in Iraq and Sudan, I ran a program that taught 10,000 women to read and write and another program that taught people with disabilities to advocate for themselves.

As a public speaker I want to help young people understand that choices have consequences and that some choices are forever. And that what you look like isn't important, that it is who you are inside that matters. I want to help our nation's kids grow into confident adults who contribute to their communities and our society.

Sometimes when I'm speaking at a high school, I ask the students who they think I was at their age: "Do you think I was part of the popular crowd?" The answer is always a resounding yes. High school students associate success and confidence as an adult with being popular or well-liked in high school. They are always surprised when I tell them that I wasn't popular. For me, school was simply about survival.

In grade school they called me long-legged moose because I was so tall. Also, my preference to wear my favorite candy-striped cotton denim shorts with blue Zinnas, instead of basketball shorts, incited ridicule from not only my own teammates, but other teams as well.

In junior high a slumber party where I was singled out by a couple of mean girls who ridiculed my homemade underwear doomed my junior high social life. And in eighth grade I was singled out by two boys in my math class for my lack of endowment. "Mosquito bite" breasts got shortened into "Skeeter." Their harassment continued for two years until one boy made the mistake of mocking my father, who was dying of cancer, and I smashed my lunch into his face. We both were sent to the principal's office, and I don't know what Mr. Loveland said to him, but even though we attended school together for three more years, he and his sidekick never bothered me again.

Although I wasn't outright bullied in high school, I didn't really fit in; a fact brought painfully home to me graduation night, when my ride to our class party (two of the popular girls, who got stuck with me) left without me when I was in the bathroom. I went home alone as the sun rose; it was an appropriate ending to my high school career.

Now, as I run through that litany, I can see the disbelief on the faces of the students I am speaking to.

Social status in high school/junior high is not an indicator of future success, but the acts perpetrated by students because of social status leave lasting scars. I have spent my life trying to prove my worth.

It's too bad that you can't have your 20-year reunion before you go to high school. I don't know why we misunderstood each other so much or why we were so mean to each other. Every time I speak at a high school, I am approached afterward by a kid who has been damaged by peers. How do you explain that in 20 years, the reasons we left kids out or teased them won't even matter? Why did we focus on our differences when we had so much more in common, then and now? Why did we make it so difficult for ourselves and everyone else? What was the point?

So why do I, now a member of the Boise High School Hall of Fame, share the experiences in my life that made me feel small, unwanted, outcast? Because when I returned home from Sudan, I was shocked by how out of control the problem of bullying had become. America's most valuable asset is its children, and when we start losing them to senseless acts such as DUI and bullying, it makes me angry.

I believe the reason bullying has become such an issue in our society is because it is the behavior we have been modeling for our children. I see it every day. Hardly anyone says please and thank you. Every public place has become a phone booth, and even when people are in physical danger, bystanders are filming it rather than calling the police. And why has the Internet perpetuated it so much? Read the comments section under any news article, and the name-calling and language very much resemble the Internet bullying that happens in schools today.

So what am I doing about it? I'm encouraging young people to tell adults to get help. I'm talking to the children in my life about bullying, sharing my experiences with them and asking about theirs. I am letting people know that I have zero tolerance for bullying not just because I'm an adult, but because I have personally had that painful experience. I'm speaking up when I see that type of behavior, and encouraging others to do the same. And no matter how outrageous or stupid the comments online get, I will not post anything anonymously. Why? Because I want to be part of the solution, not part of the problem. That's what my parents taught me.

Why was I inducted into the Boise High Hall of Fame? I've never been the CEO of a company, I've never been elected to anything. I'm just a farm girl from Idaho, someone who has always tried to do her best, someone who thinks she can change the world. And I can, but I need your help.