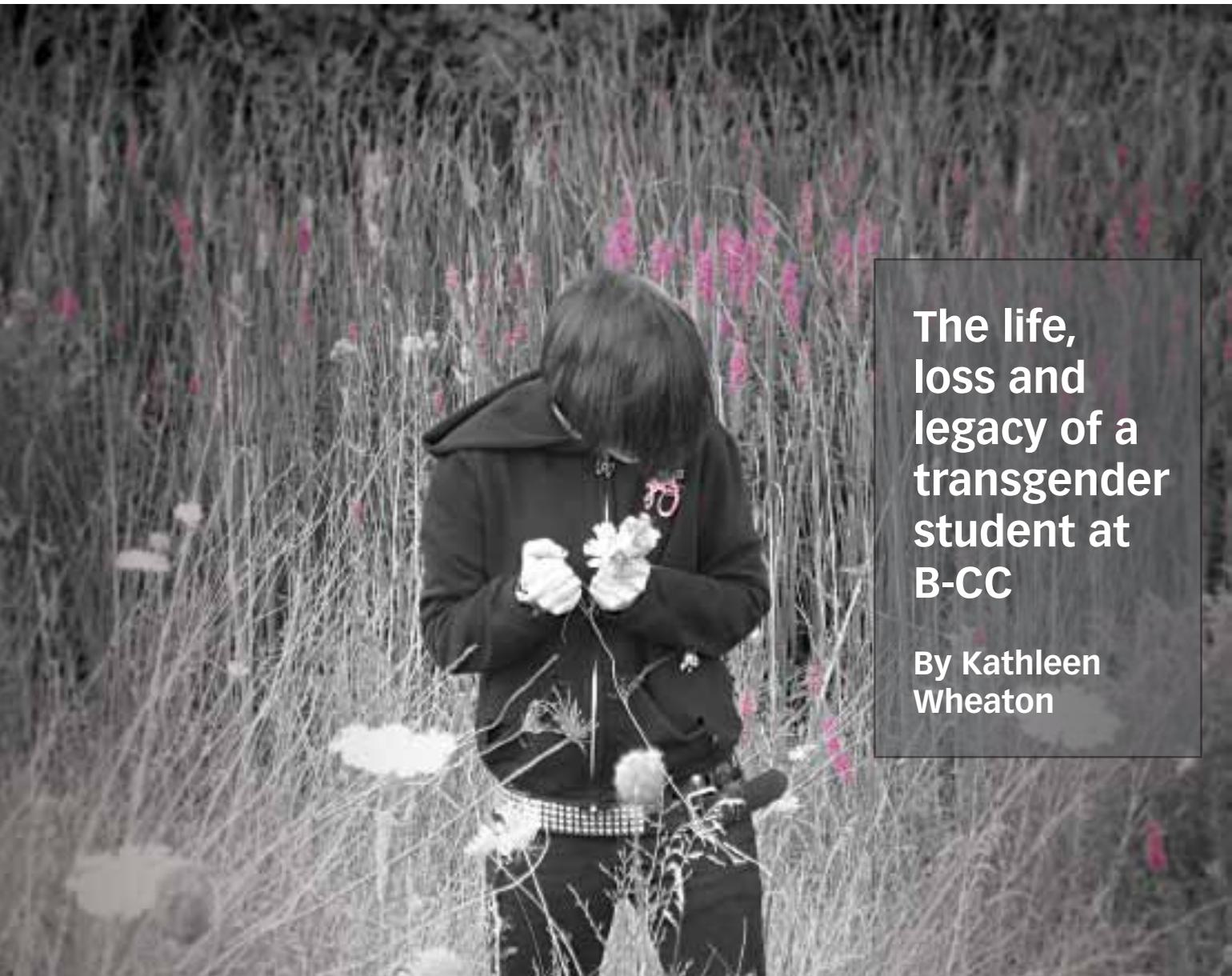


AIDEN



Aiden Rivera Schaeff directed these portraits. They were taken of him in 2007 by his mother, Cathy Schaeff, in Ontario.



The life,
loss and
legacy of a
transgender
student at
B-CC

By Kathleen
Wheaton

Ever After



Aiden was born Caitlin Rivera Schaeff on May 25, 1992. Left to right: Caitlin with parents Patty Rivera, left, and Cathy Schaeff in Kingston, Ontario; Caitlin in Glover Park, Washington, D.C.; and Caitlin at age 2, with her aunt, Jenny Schaeff, at a family cottage in Ontario.

One spring night in 2010, a month shy of his 18th birthday, Aiden Rivera Schaeff sent text messages to several of his closest friends.

Ava Dodge, a senior at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School, saw hers the next morning as she got ready for school. “I love you,” the message said. It had been sent at 3 a.m. Ava knew her friend was nocturnal, as well as spontaneously affectionate, so she replied, and didn’t think anything more about it.

Aiden’s girlfriend, Dakota Martz-Sigala, got a longer text, telling her not to blame herself for anything and encouraging her to pursue her dream of becoming a singer. This valedictory message worried the 15-year-old when she saw it the next morning, so she called a mutual friend who lived down the block from Aiden. The friend crawled into Aiden’s house through the dog door after he didn’t answer his phone. When she saw that he wasn’t in his room, she woke his parents, Patty Rivera and Cathy Schaeff, who were alarmed enough to call the police.

By then it was too late.

Aiden was a cute, skinny boy with sapphire eyes, a fringe of dyed black hair and a wry smile—artistic, funny, kind-hearted. He was, friends say, the person you could call in the middle of the night if you were upset or depressed; he didn’t judge you or make you feel that your troubles were a burden.

He was generous to a fault—sometimes giving away brand-new clothes, to

his mothers’ exasperation. He drew cartoons of himself and friends. He could strike up a conversation with anyone. “Aiden had more fun than anyone I knew,” says Monica Lesar, a close friend who is now a freshman at the University of Maryland in College Park. “But that doesn’t mean he was happy all the time.”

He had a flair for style and loved cutting and dyeing hair. Cathy Schaeff, an associate dean of undergraduate studies at American University, would come home from work to find “eight kids sprawled in the basement with dripping, dyed hair, watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.”

The Rivera-Schaeff home on Middleton Lane, a couple of blocks from B-CC in Bethesda, was a natural after-school hangout. But even after the family moved to Silver Spring in the summer before Aiden’s senior year, kids would come over and open the fridge as if they lived there. Like many teens, Aiden rebelled against household rules and restrictions—occasionally cutting class, arguing over chores, experimenting with drugs. And like many parents, Rivera and Schaeff preferred knowing where their teenager was and who his friends were, so they kept the pizza deliveries coming.

Aiden was a charmer, and his many friendships—with both boys and girls—were gratifying, particularly given the difficulties he’d had since the end of ninth grade. That’s when teasing, bullying and even violence became pervasive elements of Aiden’s life. That’s when he transitioned from being a girl to living as a boy.

Aiden was born Caitlin Rivera Schaeff on May 25, 1992, in Kingston, Ontario. Cathy Schaeff, a biologist who had married Patty Rivera in a Metropolitan Community Church ceremony three years earlier, was the birth mother. The sperm donor was a friend of Rivera’s, an actor and a “deep and trustworthy man,” she says, who remained a family friend. Caitlin’s first year and a half, as well as subsequent summers, were spent among a dotting circle of friends and family in Canada.

Then, in 1993, Schaeff accepted a job offer at American University in Washington, D.C. Rivera, a journalist and technical writer, elected to stay home with Caitlin, who attended preschool at AU and then elementary and middle school in the District. With the exception of one middle school teacher, the fact that Caitlin had two moms was a nonissue for her teachers, friends and their parents, Rivera says.

Nonetheless, Rivera and Schaeff decided to move out of the District. Attracted by the stellar reputation of Montgomery County public schools, they rented a house in Bethesda and sent Caitlin to B-CC. Empathic and friendly, she soon had a new coterie of friends, most of whom would stick with her throughout her transition.

Research suggests that one in 500 children are gender-variant, meaning they have interests and behaviors outside the cultural norm for the biological sex. Most become gay, but an estimated 20 percent never become reconciled to their birth sex and take on the other

gender as an identity—through dress and behavior, name change, or permanent physical alterations as a result of hormones or surgery.

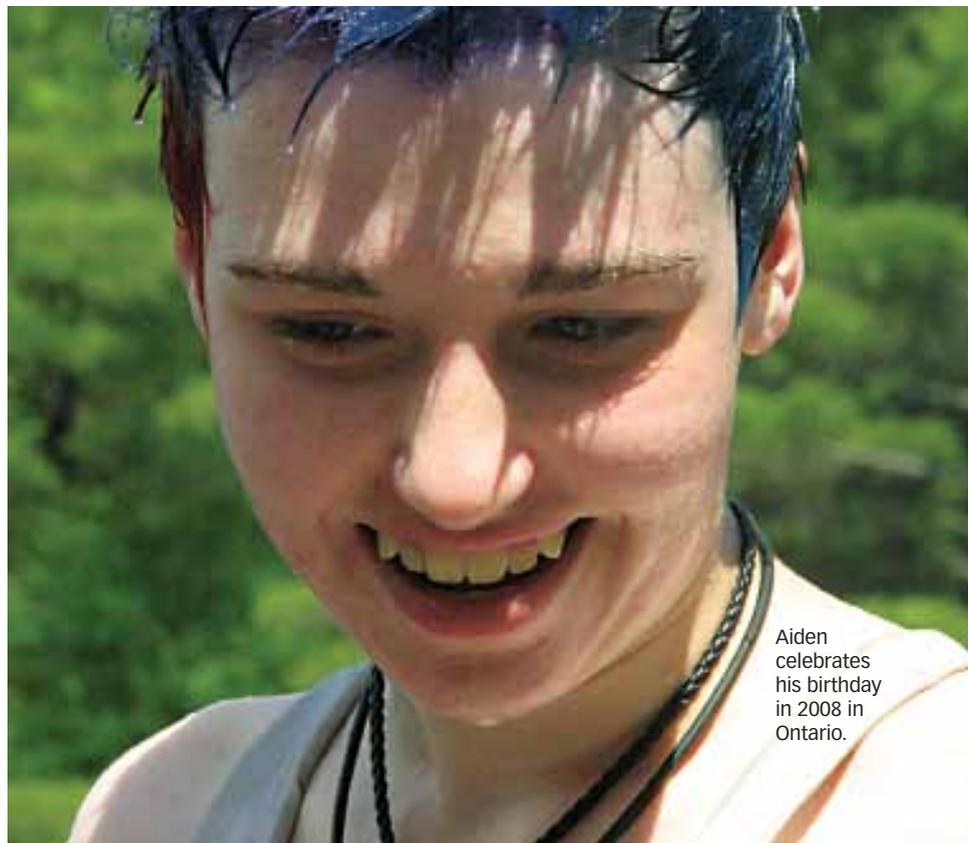
Many express the belief that they were born the “wrong” gender almost as soon as they can speak, says Dr. Edgardo Menvielle, a psychiatrist who specializes in gender at the Children’s National Medical Center in Washington, D.C. “They have a great sense of urgency about expressing the gender they feel they are,” says Menvielle, who treated Aiden during his transition. He adds that while it is not known what causes a child to become transgender, the parents’ own sexual orientation is not a likely factor, given that most transgender children, like most gay children, are born to heterosexual parents.

Honey-haired and chatty, Caitlin played with dolls and preferred dressing in pink and purple as a little girl, though she was shocked in preschool, Rivera recalls, when her classmates informed her that girls were not allowed to be pirates; she had never heard that professions were gender-specific.

Occasionally, Caitlin would tell her parents that she was a boy, Rivera says, “and we’d say, ‘OK,’ or we’d say, ‘Well, not really, but maybe you’re a girl who likes to do boy things.’” By elementary school, Caitlin was rejecting girly clothes and pleading for jeans and T-shirts from the boys’ department. Her mothers acceded, but insisted on panties, rather than boys’ briefs—fearing a teacher might deem them unfit parents were the boys’ underwear to be seen.

Sometimes people would ask Rivera whether she’d be pleased if Caitlin were to become a lesbian. “Why would I want my child to grow up in a condition that would make her life harder—so she can be like me?” she says. “If she can catch any break in life, let her catch a break.” At the same time, when Caitlin told her moms that she was gay during ninth grade, Rivera and Schaeff took the announcement in stride.

Coming out didn’t seem to bring Caitlin relief or peace of mind, however. She gained weight and wore her hair combed over her face, hiding it. The physical developments of puberty were a torment,



Aiden celebrates his birthday in 2008 in Ontario.

“I was very humbled, because I said all the things a heterosexual parent says to their queer kid: ‘Are you sure? Maybe it’s a phase, maybe it’ll pass.’ ... I was so overcome with fear.”

—Cathy Schaeff, on learning her child was transgender

and she bound her breasts with elastic bandages, making it impossible for her to run or breathe deeply. Hating her female body and feeling trapped in it were not emotions Schaeff or Rivera could relate to or understand.

Then, at the end of ninth grade, Caitlin told them she realized she wasn’t a lesbian after all. She was really a boy. From now on, she would be William Aiden, a name friends helped her choose, a name with the appropriately manly initials “WARS.”

Most experts say that forbidding or punishing gender-variant behavior is at best futile and at worst psychologically devastating. That wasn’t an issue for Aiden. But even the most tolerant parents find themselves struggling with dis-

appointment and fearing for their child’s safety and future happiness.

“You’ve always had this vision A of your kid,” Rivera says, “and here’s your kid announcing, ‘No, it’s vision B and I’m implementing it. I’m not a she, I’m a he.’”

For Schaeff, precise and reserved in contrast to the more laid-back and expansive Rivera, this news was especially difficult to absorb. “I was very humbled,” she says, “because I said all the things a heterosexual parent says to their queer kid: ‘Are you sure? Maybe it’s a phase, maybe it’ll pass. It’s really dangerous. What are you thinking, couldn’t you not?’ Patty was fabulous. She was like, ‘OK.’ But I was so overcome with fear.”

Aiden began to see Menvielle weekly, and attended monthly group ther-

aiden ever after

apy sessions with other transgender teens and young adults. Before the beginning of 10th grade, he and his parents met with teachers and staff at B-CC to inform them of his name and gender change. Though the school had not accommodated an openly transgender student before, “B-CC worked really hard to accommodate Aiden,” Rivera says. “They were consistent and thoughtful, and did everything that could be done to help him succeed.” She pauses. “But they can’t change the world. They can’t police every student’s mouth. They can’t control what happens after they leave the school grounds.”

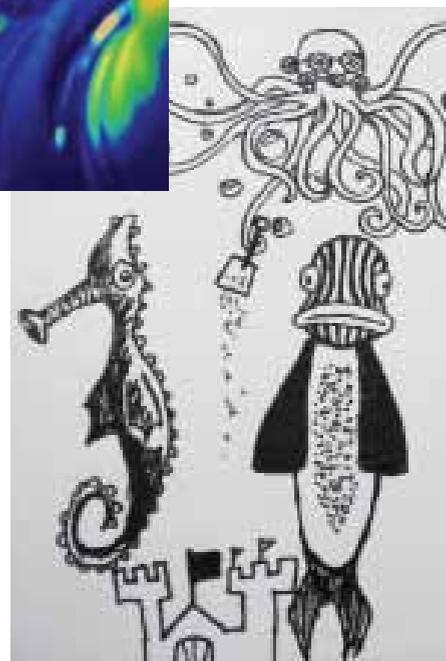
And legally, Aiden was still Caitlin, which meant that substitute teachers would call out the name printed on the attendance sheet, sometimes setting off an avalanche of mockery. He encountered hostility using the boys’ bathroom, as well, and was given a key to the staff restroom.

B-CC health teacher Jasmin Lizarazo says that “the majority of B-CC kids are magnificent” with gender issues— “accepting and open-minded. But there are always a few pumpkin-heads.” Aiden, she says, was a high-energy boy who “really was Mr. Cool, and who generally seemed to have a good opinion of himself. ...He was very caring, as many trans and gay kids are, because they know how it is to feel completely isolated.” This very sensitivity, she says, may have made Aiden more keenly aware of teasing.

Aiden’s friends say the kids who didn’t know him were the ones who were cruel. “If you knew Aiden, it was impossible to be mean to him,” says Maddie Hook, a freshman at St. Mary’s College of Maryland in St. Mary’s City. “He was nice to everyone—even to people who were mean to him. He was really good at making friends.”

Hook had known Aiden slightly when he was Caitlin—a deeply unhappy girl, she recalls, who dated her brother. As Aiden, she says, he became a good friend, blossoming into “a very attractive boy with an infectious personality. ...He was always making people laugh and smile.”

Friends who knew Aiden pre-transi-



Some of Aiden’s artwork

tion, as well as those who got to know him later, accepted his transgender status with remarkable nonchalance. “I got to know him as a guy, but some people referred to him as a girl, which was confusing at first,” Lesar says. “It just didn’t bother me either way. And once I got to know him, it was never an issue.”

It pleased Aiden that some of his younger friends weren’t initially aware that he was transgender. Dodge, who was two years behind him in school, says he confided the truth to her after they’d been friends for several months. “I said, ‘Not a problem,’” she says, though “my mom was interested, because she doesn’t have a lot of transgender friends.”

This generational shrug over nontraditional sexuality is a phenomenon most adults can’t imagine in their own high school days. “We’ve taught this generation of kids to be OK about being different, about taking medication or having different abilities—things that in my generation we’d think of as private,” Schaeff says. “These kids have no idea

of private, and it’s based on the notion that everything has been normalized. So Aiden didn’t understand [being transgender] as a not-normal thing.”

In the spring of Aiden’s junior year, he began taking testosterone. Schaeff and Rivera discouraged doing anything more drastic like surgery for the time being. Because the hormone causes irreversible changes such as wider shoulders and a more angular facial structure, it’s prescribed only after it’s clear that the desire to transition is both intense and long-lasting, Menvielle says. “The longer the desire goes on, the more likely it is to be permanent.”

Aiden’s voice deepened and he developed facial and body hair, which thrilled him. He loved having to shave. He acquired a girlfriend, Martz-Sigala, who lived in Virginia. They met through mutual friends and formed a close friendship based on shared tastes in music, film and art. But Aiden knew he had to tell her the truth before asking her out. “He sent me a text telling me his big se-

“Didn’t you used to be caitlin in ninth grade?” a student asked. Aiden walked out of the classroom, and out of school, and told his parents he wasn’t going back.

cret, and that he’d understand if I didn’t want to come outside [to go on the date],” she says from Stuttgart, Germany, where she now lives. “He was on the verge of tears when he saw me come out the door. To me, he was Aiden, still the same amazing person.”

At home, however, Rivera and Schaeff suddenly found themselves dealing with a teenage boy: moody, argumentative and sometimes—in an attempt to act more masculine—deliberately crude. Rivera, who studied nursing in college, gave him twice-weekly hormone shots. The surges of testosterone made him less sympathetic and more combative. If he was going to visit his girlfriend, he wouldn’t take it.

Transitioning had made Aiden happier, but “I don’t want to romanticize it,” Schaeff says. “He was a horrid teen sometimes, and we had spectacular battles. Patty used to say that if he was someone else’s kid, we could just sit back and thoroughly enjoy his charm and his sense of humor—but as his parents, we had to hold the line.”

In addition to a penchant for cutting class, Aiden had developed a marijuana habit during his sophomore year, and over the following summer his parents sent him to a therapeutic camp in Canada. He returned vowing that he would steer clear of drugs. But he continued to struggle with problems familiar to many parents of teens: bouts of depression, a disinclination to do homework, being the “only one” of his friends obliged to fold laundry and perform other household chores.

Overlaying all this was the constant hum of bullying, which he tried to make light of—he didn’t want people feeling sorry for him, Dodge says.

“He hated bringing [the bullying] up, or even thinking about it,” Martz-Sigala says, “although I knew it was a big part of his life.”

Once he came home bloodied after being beaten up at a Metro stop. He never said why. “At least,” he cheerfully told his horrified mothers, “they beat me up because they thought I was a boy.”

In the fall of 2009, Aiden legally changed his name. No longer a girl dressed in boys’ clothes, he now looked and sounded like a guy. Some of his male friends even tutored him in toning down his swagger and delight in breaking wind.

“He entered senior year so shiny and excited, because he really thought the reason people were mad at him as a trans kid was that he wasn’t being a successful boy,” Schaeff says. “He never really got it that being trans made other people afraid.”

To Aiden’s shock, the bullying only intensified. He received texts saying that he wasn’t a real man, that he didn’t deserve a girlfriend. “One needle jab, you stand it,” Rivera says. “Two, you stand it. A hundred begins to be unbearable.”

The final jab came after Aiden proudly responded to his new name in class. “Didn’t you used to be Caitlin in ninth grade?” a student asked. Aiden walked out of the classroom, and out of school, and told his parents he wasn’t going back.

Classmates who were present that day say the reality was worse than Aiden described to his mothers: Many others chimed in, there was general laughter, Aiden was called “it” and “she,” and the students who didn’t join in the teasing remained silent.

Hoping to realize his desire to become a hair stylist, Aiden got a job at Bang, a salon on U Street in the District, but was laid off after the economic downturn. Without structure to his days, “it was a tough road,” Rivera says. “Some days he’d act like everything was fine, and other days we were really worried about him.”

Looking back, Schaeff says, the best decision might have been to move away and let Aiden make a fresh start at a school where people didn’t know he was transgender. “But he loved Bethesda and didn’t want to leave—he had so many friends here,” she says. “The problem with teenagers, for me, is knowing how to respect their self-agency and at the same time keep them safe. At what cost do you keep them safe?”

Though he had missed almost a year of school, Aiden promised to return in the fall of 2010 and get his diploma. But he dreaded facing the bullying again. “I just don’t know how to make it different,” he told Schaeff.

“Unfortunately,” Schaeff says, her composure breaking, “when he said that I didn’t know he meant that he was going to kill himself.”

In late April 2010, she felt that Aiden seemed to have an emotional wall around himself. But suddenly, his affect shifted: “He was happy and emotive, jumping around like a little puppy and begging me for mac and cheese and other stuff he liked,” Schaeff says.

Pleased to see him in a good mood, Schaeff humored his requests. Then on April 22, he didn’t watch TV with his parents after dinner as usual, but said he wanted to spend time in his basement room. He cut his hair, twisted the rest into dreadlocks, and came upstairs to show his mothers. It looked “appalling,” Schaeff says. But Aiden was always experimenting with his hair, and everything seemed normal when she went down later to say good night.

Aiden killed himself that night.

Fearing copycats, Aiden’s parents prefer not to disclose how he did it or how he was found. Even so, Rivera says, nine distraught friends and acquaintances attempted suicide afterward.

aiden ever after



Aiden's 2006 self-portrait, taken in Bethesda

Contributions to the Aiden Rivera Schaeff Fund may be made to: Office of Development, American University, 4200 Wisconsin Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20016-8143. (Write "Aiden Rivera Schaeff Fund" in the memo line.)

"Aiden had his youth against him. He didn't have the ability that adults do to say, 'I'm going through a hard part right now, but I will have good times again.' When you're young, you think it will always be this."

—Patty Rivera

More than 350 people attended the memorial service at the Kay Spiritual Life Center at American University. One after another, teenagers approached the microphone to describe how the joyful, creative friend who changed his own life so profoundly also changed theirs.

Through their own deep grief, Schaeff and Rivera tried to convey to Aiden's heartbroken circle that a missed phone call or unanswered text would not have made a difference; nor was any one heedless joke or cruel comment to blame. "People don't kill themselves because of one little thing," Rivera says. "It's a lot of little things that build up, and Aiden had his youth against him. He didn't have the ability that adults do to say, 'I'm going through a hard part right now, but I will have good times again.' When you're young, you think it will always be *this*."

At B-CC, Aiden's younger friends have been at the forefront of efforts to stem anti-LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) bullying. Horizons, a gay-straight alliance with 60 members, has become one of the school's largest clubs. The Safe Places Initiative, which is run by students, tries to educate peers about the painful ef-

fects of language. Though racial and ethnic slurs are considered socially unacceptable, many think "it's still OK to say, 'That's so gay' when you don't like something," says Dodge, who made a tribute video to Aiden for the nationwide It Gets Better Project, which tries to inspire hope in teens harassed for their sexual orientation.

"I wish it had started earlier," Monica Lesar says. "I wish Aiden hadn't had to die for it to happen."

It's a sentiment echoed by his mothers, who have established an endowment fund at American University to sponsor student-run initiatives aimed at reducing bullying and helping victims to survive it.

They keep in close touch with the transgender kids in Aiden's support group, several of whom are now in their 20s. LGBT youths are three times more likely to commit suicide, according to a 2008 study by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. Social rejection is a major factor among transgender teens, according to Menvielle. But, he adds, "it's important to emphasize that suicide is not the inevitable fate—that there are teens who successfully transgender in spite of the challenges."

"It actually *does* get better," one member of Aiden's support group says dryly. A computer science major who is 22, the transgender young woman nonetheless is concerned about leaving the open-minded shelter of college for the working world of Washington, where two separate assaults on transgender people made headlines last summer.

Many of Aiden's friends are also in college now, and his mothers are deeply moved by the fact that they still come by with plates of homemade cookies, or just to hang out. "We were always the drop-in center," Schaeff says. "It's astonishing that the kids are still so focused. Because one year is equivalent to 30 in teenage years."

It probably felt like 30 years to Aiden as he contemplated just one more year of high school.

"I think if he could have gotten through and gone to college, he would have made it," Dodge says. "He wouldn't have felt like life was *Lord of the Flies*." ■

Kathleen Wheaton lives in Bethesda and writes frequently for Bethesda Magazine. To comment on this story, email comments@bethesdamagazine.com.