

Letters to a Bullied Girl

When a 12-year-old girl was bullied, thousands of people rallied to help.

BY ALEXIS BURLING

It sounds like the plot of a horror movie: A sixth-grade girl with a serious health problem becomes the target of bullies. The girls at school mock her for being sick and laugh at her in the halls. They even start a “haters” club on the Internet and try to recruit other members.

Sadly, this “plot” describes the real life of Olivia Gardner, a 12-year-old from Novato, California, who suffers from a disorder of the central nervous system called epilepsy. The bullying got so bad that Olivia switched schools twice to escape the ridicule. She suffered daily anxiety attacks. And her self-esteem plummeted. *The San Francisco Chronicle* even ran an article about Olivia’s plight. Eventually, Olivia’s mother withdrew her from school so she could learn at home in peace.

But unlike most horror movies, Olivia’s story has a happy—and surprising—ending. Sisters Emily and Sarah Buder (then 17 and 14, respectively) read the article and decided to help. They launched a campaign in their school asking students and people in the community to send letters of hope to Olivia.

“What was happening to her was so horrible, and she didn’t deserve to be treated that way,” Sarah said of Olivia. “We wanted her to know that she wasn’t alone.”

As the months went by, Emily and Sarah’s project led to more newspaper articles. The



From left to right: Emily Buder, Sarah Buder, and Olivia Gardner, talking to students about bullying.

three girls appeared together on the popular TV morning show, *TODAY*, which was broadcast around the country. And more and more letters poured into Olivia’s house. Some were from kids like her. Others were from adults who had been bullied. Most surprising were the ones from grown-up bullies who looked back on their own nasty behavior with shame.

In all, more than 6,500 people around the world embraced Olivia with their care and concern. Some of their letters appear in a book published last year called *Letters to a Bullied Girl: Messages of Healing and Hope*. Since then, Olivia, Sarah, and Emily have been traveling to schools around the country to get their message out—that bullying hurts, and that sometimes it can take an entire community to stop it.

The book is an inspiration to many. And it has also helped Olivia, who still feels pain when she remembers how she was treated. “I feel so wonderful that there was so much support,” she says. “The letters changed my life.” ■

No-Sweat BUBBLE TEST

Read the article on page 30. Then fill in the circle next to the best answer for each question below. Next time you take a real bubble test, you'll be a pro!

1. According to the article, how did Emily and Sarah Buder learn about Olivia Gardner's situation at school?
 - A. They saw the "haters" Internet site.
 - B. They went to her school.
 - C. They read a newspaper article about Olivia.
 - D. Their mother told them the story.

2. What did Olivia and her mother do to try to stop the bullying?
 - A. Olivia switched schools twice.
 - B. Her mother joined her at school.
 - C. Olivia wrote a column in the school paper.
 - D. Olivia started skipping school.

3. What words BEST describe Olivia Gardner since the book appeared?
 - A. angry and wild
 - B. popular and loud
 - C. mean and petty
 - D. inspiring and hopeful

4. What does "plummeted" mean in the second paragraph?
 - A. stayed the same
 - B. dropped significantly
 - C. changed slightly
 - D. improved dramatically

5. All of the following people wrote letters to Olivia EXCEPT
 - A. other kids who had been bullied.
 - B. people who had been bullies in the past.
 - C. the girls who bullied Olivia at her school.
 - D. adults who were bullied as kids.

6. Why did the author write this article?
 - A. to tell the story of a brave, bullied girl who was helped by two sisters
 - B. to explain why people tease each other
 - C. to describe how to stop a bully
 - D. to persuade readers to write letters to people in need

Critical Thinking

Answer the following questions on a separate piece of paper.

Explain your answers using information and details from the article.

1. Why did Sarah and Emily decide to launch a letter-writing campaign for Olivia?
2. How do you think *Letters to a Bullied Girl* can help other students?