

Tennessee teen's suicide highlights dangers of anti-LGBTQ bullying

Channing Smith's death by suicide after being cyberbullied highlights the decade-old

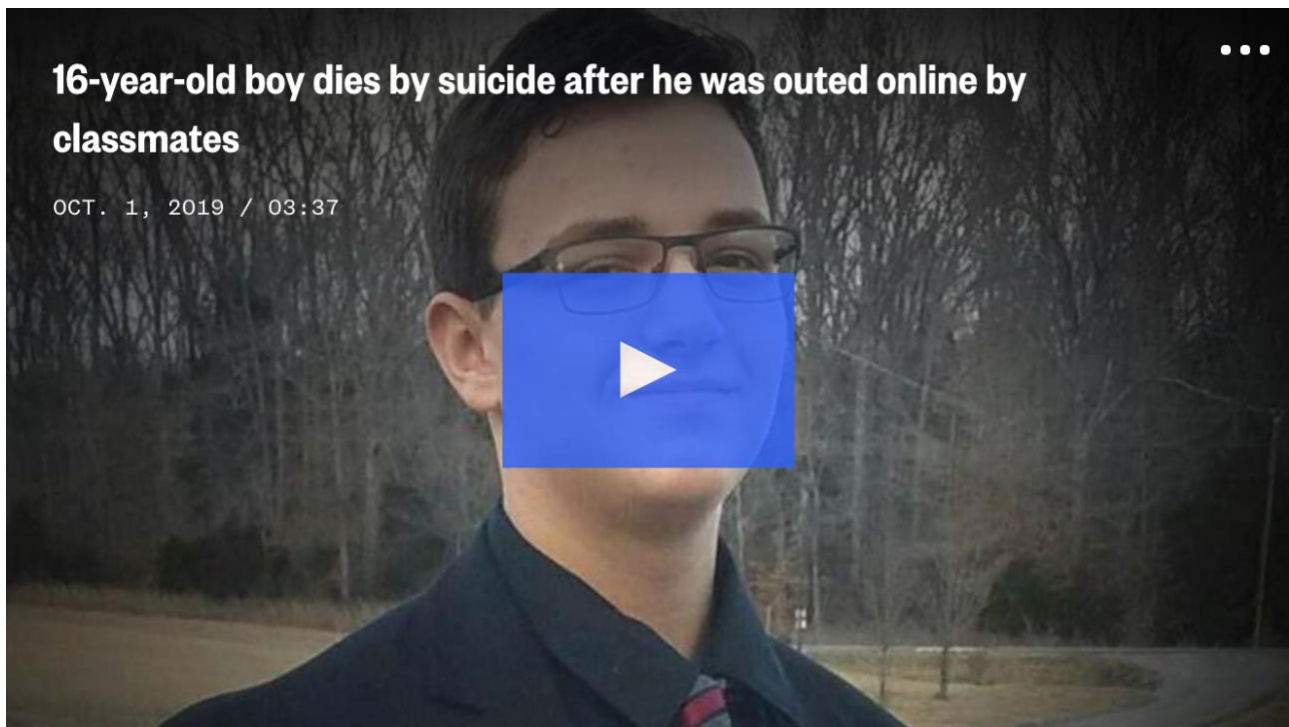
Oct. 2, 2019, 1:15 AM CEST

By Tim Fitzsimons

News reports about the death of Tennessee teen Channing Smith, who [died by suicide last week](#), sounded all too familiar to New Jersey mom Jane Clementi. Like Smith, her son Tyler took his own life following anti-LGBTQ cyberbullying.

But now, nine years after her son's death, Clementi said there's reason to be hopeful amid the tragedy.

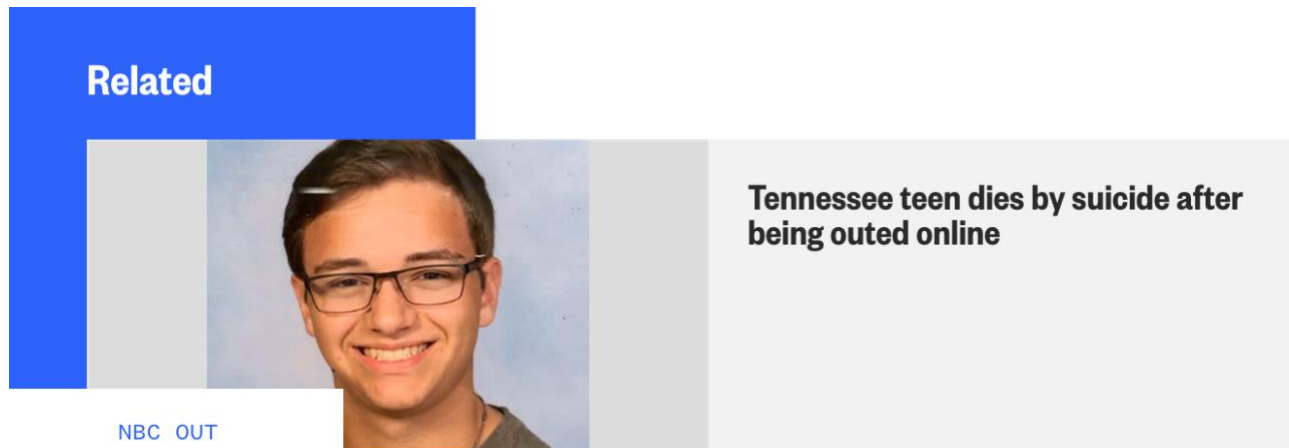
“There have been some positive changes,” said Clementi, who has been working to change the culture that led to Tyler's death.



In a case that made national headlines in 2010, Tyler took his life after his Rutgers University roommate cyberbullied him by covertly filming and broadcasting Tyler's dorm room hookup.

“Ultimately, what we want to do is change behaviors,” said Clementi, now co-founder and CEO of the Tyler Clementi Foundation, an organization focused on ending online and offline bullying and harassment. “There need to be consequences, but we need to change people's behaviors — the youth that are cyberbullies need to be approached as if it were a mental health crisis as well.”

One landmark bill that has emerged from her activism is the [Tyler Clementi Higher Education Anti-Harassment Act](#). Reintroduced in 2017 by Sen. Tammy Baldwin, D-Wis., Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., and Rep. Mark Pocan, D-Wis., the bill, if passed, would require colleges and universities to establish policies to prohibit harassment and would incentivize schools to create anti-cyberbullying programs.



Even as awareness of the impact of bullying has spread, thanks in part to groups like the Tyler Clementi Foundation, several cases of LGBTQ suicides have made national headlines as examples of the dangerous impact of bullying, which increasingly takes place online.

There was 9-year-old Jamel Myles from Denver who [died by suicide](#) after classmates bullied him for being gay. He had come out to his mother the summer before fourth grade and wore false fingernails on the first days of school. Just days after he faced relentless bullying, his mother found him dead.

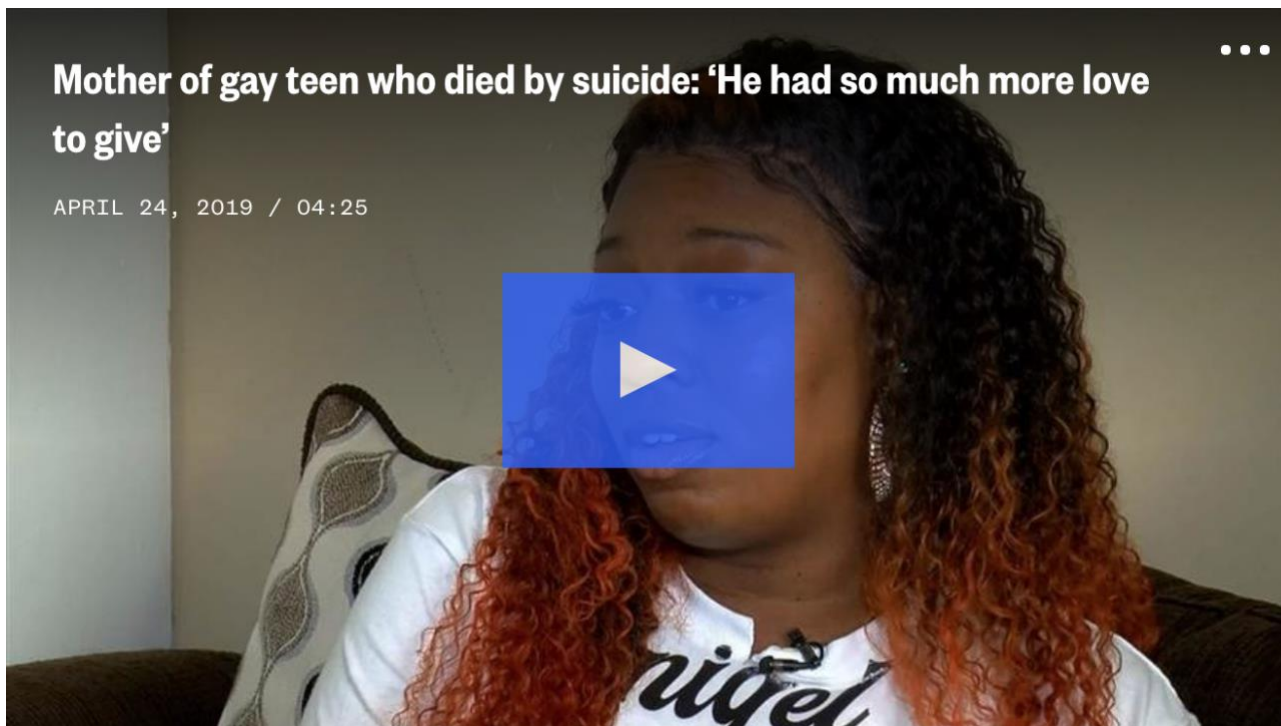
“I want justice for my son and the only way to get that is to touch people’s hearts and tell them if we love more, it will be harder to hate,” Jamel's mother, Leia Pierce, wrote in a Facebook post at the time.

And then there was Nigel Shelby, the [Alabama high school freshman who died by suicide](#) after facing bullying from classmates and unsympathetic school administrators who allegedly told him being gay was “a choice.” His mother, Camika Shelby, said school administrators knew her son was experiencing suicidal ideation and did nothing to inform her.

Soon after Nigel's death, a deputy sheriff in Alabama's Madison County [was placed on leave](#) after leaving homophobic comments on a social media post about the boy’s death.

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The statistics about LGBTQ suicides and suicide attempts are stark. This June, The Trevor Project found that [up to 2 million LGBTQ youth contemplate suicide every year](#) in what the group called a “conservative estimate.” A 2019 study found that a quarter of all young adolescent suicides — kids ages 12 to 14 — [may be LGBTQ youth](#). And roughly 50 percent of trans boys, 42 percent of nonbinary kids and 30 percent of trans girls have attempted suicide at least once, [according to a 2018 study](#).

Clementi said these statistics are often hard to make out of death certificates and other official data regarding youth suicide, because almost none contain any information on whether these youth are LGBTQ. According to the Los Angeles Times, [Los Angeles County will soon begin tracking this information](#) thanks to an ordinance passed by the city council.

But efforts like Clementi’s are starting to bear fruit. While all states have some sort of anti-bullying law, the laws that specifically mention LGBTQ people (and these laws usually mention other protected classes, such as racial and religious minorities) are correlated with [lower rates of suicide for all youth](#).

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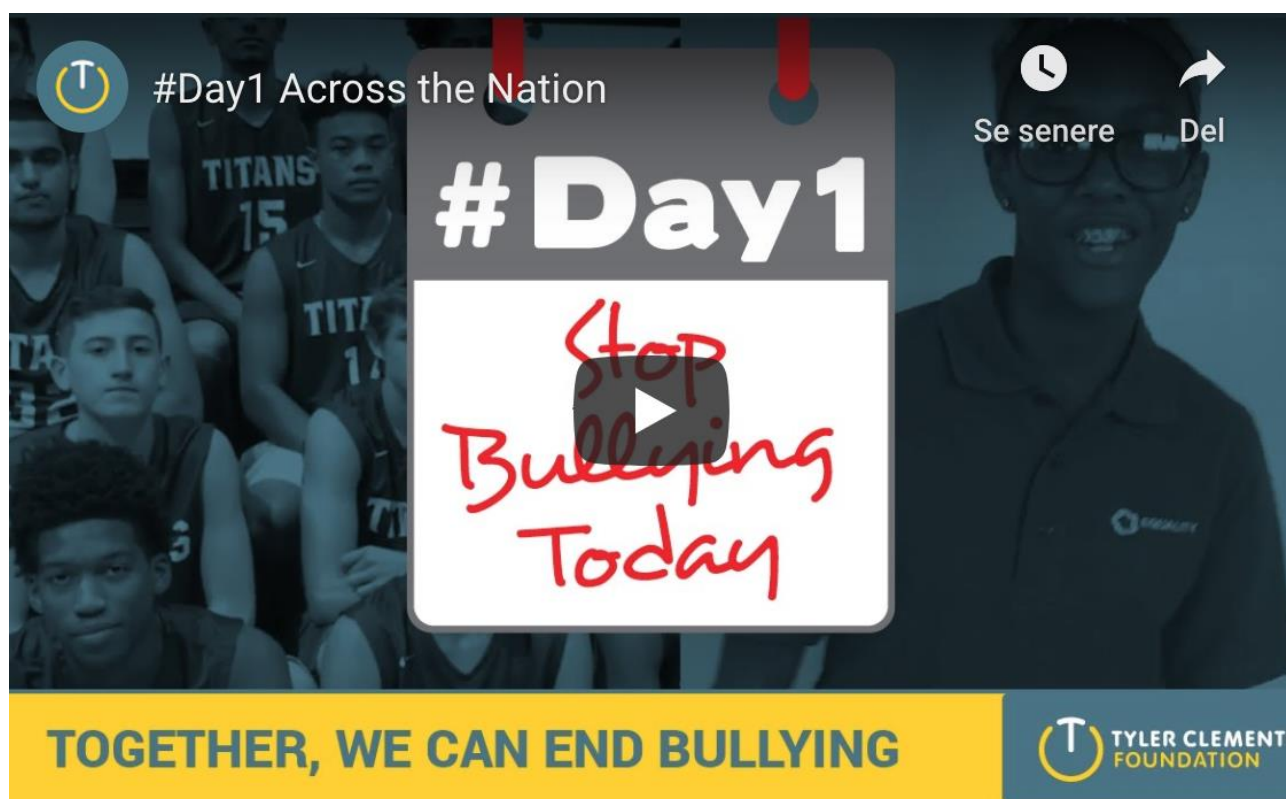
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Even former Sen. Orrin Hatch, who in 1977 said “I wouldn't want to see homosexuals teaching school anymore than I'd want to see members of the American Nazi Party teaching school,” [came around on the issue](#). Before retiring from the Senate in 2018, Hatch [honored LGBTQ Pride Month](#) and decried the high rate of LGBTQ suicide and the disproportionate mental health challenges faced by LGBTQ youth. “These young people need us — and we desperately need them,” Hatch said.

Clementi touts her organization’s “Day 1” initiative, which is an effort to have schools make known, “on the very first day, that it’s a welcoming and inclusive space and that there are boundaries and that all students are welcome.”

“I always view it as a child who might be listening, who might be in that space and hear that they are going to be welcome here and going to be safe here, and I think it makes a huge difference for every student in that space,” Clementi told NBC News.



The Trevor Project, an LGBTQ youth crisis prevention organization, [recently won a \\$1.5 million grant](#) to use Google’s artificial intelligence technology to combat LGBTQ youth suicide by incorporating “machine learning and natural language processing into its crisis services,” such as text and phone crisis lines.

And there are simpler things each of us can do today, according to Clementi. Her organization has asked the public to sign its [Tyler Clementi Upstander Pledge](#), an online pledge committing to stand up against online and offline bullying and harassment. Several 2020 presidential candidates — including South Bend, Indiana, Mayor Pete Buttigieg, former Vice President Joe Biden, Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J., Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., and Sen. Kamala Harris, D-Calif., — are among its signatories.

“Sometimes it’s the simplest things that we have to be reminded of,” Clementi said.

If you or someone you know is in crisis, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at [800-273-8255](tel:800-273-8255), text HOME to 741741 or visit [SpeakingOfSuicide.com/resources](https://www.speakingofsuicide.com/resources) for additional resources. Or contact [The Trevor Project](https://www.thetrevorproject.org), the world’s largest suicide prevention and crisis intervention organization for LGBTQ youth at 1-866-488-7386 or by texting START to 678678.

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