

editor's message



Consequences



Jonas Longacre with two of his favorite dictionaries.
Courtesy photo

When I was 6 or 7 years old I hanged myself. I did it in the kitchen dressed in my cowboy gear with a belt hooked into the handle of an open cupboard door above the refrigerator. With the belt looped around my neck, I kicked out the chair upon which I was standing. My parents were out for the evening, but our babysitter, Mrs. Black, happened to be passing by in the front hallway, and, to her horror and incredulity, saw me dangling in the kitchen.

I wasn't trying to kill or even hurt myself; I didn't think about consequences. I was just

curious to see what hanging felt like. In a comic book I had read the day before, a young cattle rustler is captured, and in the story's last panel, he is shown hanging from a gallows.

The only consequences of my little experiment were a gash on the neck and a ban on reading violent comic books. And Mrs. Black never sat for me again.

Kids are curious. They like to experiment. And they are into all kinds of things that their parents and teachers and sometimes even their friends don't know about.

One of those "experiments" is commonly called the "choking game" and tragically in January it took the life of 15-year-old Jonas Longacre, the son of Mark Longacre and Patti Torp, and a student at Bloomington High School South.

I knew Jonas because his stepmother, Nancy Hiller, is a friend and frequent contributor to *Bloom*. Jonas was the nicest, most endearing kid you could ever hope to meet. At a visitation and memorial service for Jonas at the Allen Funeral Home, hundreds of people turned out, waiting in line for up to an hour, to give Mark, Patti, and Nancy hugs.

There is a ton of material on the Internet about this insidious game that takes young lives. What's involved is self-strangulation in order to achieve a high, the result of oxygen rushing back to the brain after it has been cut off. As the website G.A.S.P. (Games Adolescents Shouldn't Play) notes it is most popular among high-achieving adolescents, especially boys. Another name for it is the "good kids' high" because it's often tried by

law-abiding tweens and teenagers who wouldn't think of imbibing alcohol or drugs.

Jonas fit the profile. He was a brilliant student with an energetic, curious mind, whether it was searching the etymology of a word or trying to understand how the human brain works. At the time of his death he was reading *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* by Douglas Hofstadter, a book that explores common themes in the lives and works of logician Kurt Gödel, artist M.C. Escher, and composer Johann Sebastian Bach.

Jonas loved languages, particularly Latin and Spanish, and was considering a career in computational linguistics. For Christmas, both Patti and Nancy, unbeknownst to one another, gave him copies of the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. At the memorial service, his high school friend Abe Leite recounted how they would text back and forth in Spanish, "just because we could."

Jonas was much more than bookish, however. He also loved nature, hiking, rock climbing, and learning survivalist skills. He was a funny kid and fun to be around. He liked people and could relate to them — whether they were 9 or 90. He smiled often and his smile made you smile.

According to Bloomington brain scientist Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, the teen years are a time of neurological transformation, a time when brains are at their most vulnerable. The prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that accounts for our ability to plan ahead, to understand the consequences of our behavior, and control our impulses, does not fully develop until later. Teenagers are at risk and need our guidance.

Jonas was not just a gifted student, he was a natural teacher; he inspired his family and friends to learn so they could keep up with him. He would want others to learn from his tragic misjudgment.

It is up to families, educators, health professionals, coaches, youth workers, the media — all of us — to make sure kids get the message that choking to see what it feels like is not a game or an experiment. That once the choking begins, there is no controlling the consequences — and the consequences can be fatal.

Kids always have and always will think they are invincible. Even the amazing ones like Jonas.

Malcolm Abrams
editor@magbloom.com