

(From previous page)

years later at university.

My mom refers to those dark days at high school as my dark glasses period. I still feel as if I'm suffocating when I think back to those wasted years and how I wished my youth away.

It was only at the end of my school career that I started making friends with other outsiders, and with their help and my mom's prayers I became my own best friend.

It took me years to believe what I was trying to tell myself: how boring life would be if there were only first-team captains and headboys and headgirls in the world.

It's people who are different – such as my friends and me – who make life interesting and worthwhile. This is the case everywhere – at school, in church and in parliament

I still can't help wondering whether I'd have ended up behind bars if I'd been able to lay my hands on a samurai sword, gun or other weapon. I used to spend my time thinking violent thoughts.

Thank heavens my caring parents and teachers at Welkom Gymnasium intervened and encouraged me with their love and understanding.

I wish I could turn back the clock and tell boys such as Morné, "It's okay to be different, just be yourself. You'll get further

in life because you're not like the other 99 per cent carbon-copy tin soldiers.

"But don't let your anger smoulder and unleash a bloodbath. Rather let it become your driving force to do what everyone says you can't."

"Look at me – I came out the other end without blood on my hands. I know about your anger and how it foments cruel emotions inside you."

I have this message for fathers: go and look for your children wherever they might be hiding.

Open the curtains in their dim bedrooms and let in the sunlight. Hug them tightly and tell them over and over, "I love you just the way you are."

And mothers, repeat the following mantra to your receptive child, "Stop wishing you were different. You're unique, you're one of a kind!"

Ruthless bullies should be in the dock with their parents to account for their actions.

Where do those disgusting

words come from? Does your child's behaviour reflect your own loveless life? What do you say when you think your kids aren't listening? Stop using words such as moffie for men who don't fit your testosterone-laden image of what a man should be.

I appeal to more enlightened, popular kids to reach out to loners. You have the resources to involve outsiders and help them believe in themselves.

Take a walk around the school grounds at break, look behind the domestic science classroom and elsewhere, find those drifting on the edge. Find the kids who pray period after period that someone will come up to them and say, "Hey, listen, you're actually okay."

Or do you want to sit back and wait for the next cry for help from a schoolyard bloodbath?

Reach out now because who at that Krugersdorp school could have foreseen murder would be committed in their midst before school was out that day? □

STAMP OUT BULLYING

■ Parents, talk to your children every day after school. Find out what they did and get to know their friends, suggests Janine Shamos of the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (Sadag).

"Children won't easily admit they're being bullied; parents must ask."

■ Don't tell children to fight back; that's not the solution. It's better to walk away and talk to a sympathetic teacher. Tell your child to stay in a group. Bullies target those who are alone, isolated and vulnerable.

■ Children who are bullied must learn life skills at support groups and workshops and with the help of psychologists.

■ Children who do nothing when others are being bullied can become bullies too.

Remind your children that such passivity is wrong. Encourage them to create a bully-free area in the playground where everyone is welcome and bullying is not tolerated. Tell them that reaching out to children in need will make them stronger and more powerful.

■ Contact Sadag on 0800-567-567 for information about image-building workshops and how to crack down on bullies.

SEND US YOUR STORY

Do you have a moving or lighthearted life experience you'd like to share? Send your story of 800 to 2 000 words to My Story, YOU, PO Box 7167, Roggebaai 8012; fax 021-406-2937 or e-mail charlene.rolls@media24.com. You may add photographs but we can't return them or respond to stories. Use a pseudonym if you like but please include your real name and daytime contact details.

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