

## Ann Kenny

I'm here this evening to share a bit of my story as a parent and as a teacher. I hope that my experience may add to understanding a very complex issue.

I've been a parishioner at St. Mark's since 1991. My 2 children grew up in Palo Alto and at St. Mark's, and both attended Palo Verde, Jordan and Paly. My son graduated in 2003 and my daughter in 2007.

Early in my daughter's freshman year at Paly my family's life turned down an unforeseen road. One evening she came to my husband and me to tell us she needed help. Her close friend from St. Mark's youth group, a Gunn student, had encouraged her to do so. She told us she had been struggling with feelings of intense sadness and despair since early middle school. She had worked hard to control her pain but it was getting worse, not better. She didn't understand what was happening to her and felt guilty because as she said, "She had a good family, friends and a good life in Palo Alto and there was no reason to feel as bad as she did."

We sought medical help and information. She was diagnosed with clinical depression and anxiety disorder. With medication, group counseling and therapy she began digging her way out of the hole of depression and gained more understanding of her emotional state. She continues to work on this as a junior in college.

On reflection we saw and we see warning signs that we missed. The dilemma we faced as parents, even with the official diagnosis, was separating "typical" teenage behaviors from something more severe.

School was a challenge. Attendance was a big issue. Getting out of bed and staying at school was difficult for my daughter. I dreaded the attendance reports. We connected with some of her teachers. Some made accommodations or at least conveyed concern. We met with the school counselor who presented possible options. My daughter was determined to stay at Paly. She did; she graduated and she made it to college. That was a major accomplishment! But it was hard for us all, and of course hardest for her.

We wish we had known sooner and acted sooner to prevent some of my daughter's pain. But we are grateful for the personal connections that were there to help us.

As I said, I am a teacher. I experience the demands and challenges that schools face. My primary job is to teach California's academic standards. But, the children sitting in my classroom bring their own lives with them when they enter the door. I must address the social and emotional needs that underlie their academic success. Some days it feels overwhelming.

Teachers care about their students. Parents care about the well-being of their children. How can we connect this caring to support our youth? What can we do better than we are already doing in our schools? How can we find ways for parents to understand and know more about signs of mental illness and the effects of stress? How can we help our children starting in 6<sup>th</sup> grade find healthy ways of coping with stress and confusing emotional states?

We can, if we connect. And we must because we care.