

Sign My Cast

It's been a year since author Ned Vizzini jumped off the roof of his parents' apartment building in Brooklyn, ending his life at age 32.

After the shock of hearing this news wore off, I started to feel something else, which surprised me: frustration.

I knew Ned. I knew he struggled with depression. But the reason Ned and I got along so well was that he counseled me through the loss of my girlfriend Tawny, also by suicide. So I wondered, in vain, about how this precocious young man, who had so much to offer me during my devastating loss, could take his own life. Why couldn't Ned heed the invaluable advice he had given me? And even more upsetting: if Ned couldn't overcome his troubles, how could anyone else?

I was introduced to Ned in a roundabout way. I am an English teacher in alternative public high schools in New York City. I currently teach at a last-chance high school for over-aged and under-credited students. Prior to that, I spent 12 years at Passages Academy, a school program for children going through the judicial system.

Finding texts that appeal to these students and their often-difficult life circumstances is not always easy. (Only *The Outsiders* [Hinton, 1967], *The Things They Carried* [O'Brien, 1990], and *The Gospel According to Larry* [Tashjian, 2001] have recurred each year.) But when my friend Jesse Eisenberg suggested I try *Be More Chill* (Vizzini, 2004) with my students (Jesse was recording the audio book at that time), I immediately found another staple. Ned's endlessly clever story follows a teenage outcast who purchases a technologically advanced, pill-sized supercomputer called a "squip" that offers the protagonist some much-needed guidance and

direction in navigating the cruel hallways of high school. My students loved his book. While still reading an early chapter, one student blurted out to his classmates, "Ned Vizzini doesn't write *about* us, but he does write *for* us." (Ned would later post this quote on his website.)

Through Jesse, I invited Ned to visit the school, and he graciously accepted. Over multiple visits, he spoke about why he preferred ambiguous endings in literature and compared writing to a flag: "Flags have 3–7 colors, not 7,000,000. Only by limiting the color palate does the flag have the chance of being a memorable symbol. There are too many things to write about, but if you limit them, you can then really bring out creativity." He was warm and funny and indulged every question, whether silly (*How much do you get paid?*) or not so silly (*Is the squip supposed to be like a conscience?*). After his first visit, Ned wrote me a letter telling me how he thought that books could be a wonderful form of escape for my incarcerated students. And he commented on what he saw in each of the students—recognition that their current circumstance was only temporary.

In some of his subsequent work, Ned wrote about his personal struggles with mental illness with an openness that is refreshing and unapologetic—as entertaining as it is important. Ned's third book, *It's Kind of a Funny Story* (2006), chronicles Ned's time at New York Methodist's Psychiatric Inpatient Center in Brooklyn. Only after we saw the movie version of *It's Kind of a Funny Story* did Tawny, my girlfriend of 11 months, feel comfortable enough to share with me her own experiences with depression, hospitalization, and thoughts of suicide.

It wasn't long before Tawny voluntarily checked into the NYU Psychiatric Ward. She spent a month there

having her medication monitored to protect her from the potentially dangerous side effects of forgetfulness or purposeful misuse. From visiting Tawny each day, reading Ned's books, and listening to him speak with my students, I learned that depression is a real and life-threatening disease. I found that people (particularly young people) who suffer from depression don't need to be "cheered up" or "fixed" as much as they need to be listened to and assured that they are okay. They need to know that *they* are not the problem, that it is the *disease* that is the problem.

After Tawny checked out of the psychiatric ward, she and I met up with Ned at a writing scholarship event where he and Jesse were on hand to read excerpts from Ned's books. The common theme resonating through Ned's words that night was that human feelings often contain little logic or rationality.

Tawny committed suicide the next month. Ned called me and gave me sober insights into the disease of depression and mental illness, explaining that I cannot blame myself for her death. Unlike most health problems, he said, depression and thoughts of suicide are difficult to diagnose and even harder to prevent, as depression's symptoms show up neither in blood tests nor on X-rays.

Soon thereafter, Ned became another of depression's victims. He died from a disease that, in this day and age, can only be contained and never fully goes away. It's a disease as complicated as it is deadly. As such, it needs more transparency in the social dialogue. During a phone call after Tawny's death, Ned pointed out that, when kids break a bone and have their buddies sign a cast, they wear the cast as a sort of badge of honor. However, with a mind or spirit fractured by depression, there are no casts to sign. There is no boasting of or honor in this injury. There is mainly shame and sorrow and silence.

This hope for a collective transparency surrounding mental illness is something that I have been personally striving for as a way to navigate my own feelings about Tawny, the woman I loved. I am still searching for the language or emotional intellect that might enable me to share my thoughts of a beautiful soul I think about always. Like many of us, my words and abilities of expression are limited—so much so that I am only able to address her loss safely in my writing by exploring it within the context of Ned, a kind man whom I only met a few times.

The disease is never fully in remission, and its sufferers are never cured. As such, no one, not even the sufferer, can anticipate what the disease will bring next. The only thing for sure, Ned told me, is that depression is on the rise, and if the numbers continue as they are, depression will be the second largest killer after heart disease by 2020. Since he passed, more than 40,000 Americans have committed suicide. That's more than the number of annual gun deaths in this country.

Only in retrospect and in the context of Ned's unnecessary death does his advice take on a different meaning. Perhaps Ned was struggling to reconcile his own muddled feelings about his own depression and thoughts of suicide. And in a strange way, his "squip" may have been his own screaming desire for inner-voice navigation, the angel-on-the-shoulder fighting whatever devils Ned must have been carrying inside.

In the letter that Ned sent to me after his initial school visit, he thanked me and my colleagues for fostering a creative and optimistic environment for "people who know that the real world holds promise for them." The sentiment of a hopeful tomorrow is something that depression steals from its sufferers. During difficult times, my students fed off of the hope they saw in Ned. What I didn't realize then was that Ned also fed off the hope he saw in my students. The sharing was symbiotic, and this symbiosis must not stop. Ned's words and his work, his life and his death, have taught me that we must always remind each other that the real world holds promise, no matter how difficult things have become. This is true not only for at-risk students, but for Ned, for Tawny, and for everyone. We must be each other's squips. We must sign each other's casts.

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