Columbia mother solicits letters of support for son who threatened suicide

She asks community to tell him 'he matters' and 'it does get better'

By Yvonne Wenger, The Baltimore Sun

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Hours after Karen Brocklebank's son posted pictures online late last month of his forearm marred with a series of self-inflicted cuts and a threat to kill himself on his 13th birthday, she sat in an uncomfortable emergency room chair, sleepless and in despair.

The Columbia family had spent more than a year in therapy sessions for treatment of Noah's depression. They pleaded with his Howard County school and the parents of his bullies to intervene. But it wasn't until that night in the hospital that Brocklebank came up with an idea that seemed to work like nothing before.

Brocklebank went online and created a website, LettersforNoah.com, and a Facebook page to ask for help in showing her son that he matters and that life after middle school does get better. Soon, the envelopes and packages overwhelmed the tiny Simpsonville post office box that Brocklebank secured.

When his 13th birthday arrived Friday, Noah read a new batch of letters, screened by his parents, from his favorite teachers, cousins, friends and strangers from Baltimore and as far away as Alaska, Ireland, Japan and Australia — 2,000 in all.

Word spread swiftly online with thousands of hits to the website and nearly 12,000 likes on Facebook. And among the letters received in less than two weeks were gifts: manuscripts for a collection of children's books; an offer for flying lessons; a hat with the logo of the Pittsburgh Steelers, Noah's favorite team; gift cards; and origami creations.

There was a letter from one of Noah's favorite elementary school teachers: "I remember you fondly — humorous, smart, creative, fun to be around. … Life gets real good! But you have to get past the hard parts to reach the best parts."

A brightly colored card was postmarked in California with photographs of caterpillars and a message: "I remember how it felt to be bullied and to have a good friend suddenly avoid me. It does get better. People grow up. … Your family loves you and people that have never met you care."
And an aloha from another Noah in Hawaii read, "Please keep your head up. You are obviously the love of your mother's life."

Mental health experts see both benefits and risks in Brocklebank's decision to reveal her son's struggles and identity. Brocklebank acknowledges that her choice to speak publicly is controversial, but it wasn't without deliberation.

Brocklebank said she wants to teach her son that mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of. And she wanted to harness the power of social media, rather than allow her son to be a victim of it. His bullying and exclusion began on XBox Live, an online feature that allows multiple players to compete and communicate online, and he posted his suicide message on Instagram, where his peers have already seen it.

Brocklebank said she and her husband, David, felt desperate and powerless, disappointed with the response of Noah's school and the parents of the bullies, and fearful that they had done too little too late. They said Noah was called names and purposely left out of games and that boys tried to convince other students not to be his friend.

Always on Noah's parents' minds were high-profile stories of teens who took their own lives, such as Grace McComas, the 15-year-old Glenelg High School sophomore who committed suicide last Easter after severe cyber-bullying.

"My heart has been in a vice," Brocklebank said. "You feel so helpless and angry, and it's just the loneliest place to be."

Christina Calamaro, professor at the University of Maryland School of Nursing, said a parent needs to evaluate the long-term consequences of documenting a child's most personal details online, especially a fragile child's.

"There is always a dark side of social media," she said.

Continuing professional mental health treatment is paramount, Calamaro said. She also said parents should empower children who are bullied and perhaps unplug them from online outlets.

Ashley Womble, online communications manager for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, said Noah may be living in a world different from the one previous generations encountered as adolescents, but the barbs, whether posted online or written on a bathroom wall, are the same.

Womble also said social media can save lives, and Brocklebank has attempted to tap into that potential. Other online movements aimed at assuring teens that life can get better have drawn huge followings.

"Connectedness is one of the very prominent protective factors for suicide prevention," Womble said. "If you have a community of people who love you and give you encouragement, feeling connected and having a sense of community can really help."
Sameer Hinduja, co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Center at Florida Atlantic University, also sees significant value in soliciting outside support and embracing social media. Hinduja said that receiving messages from other youths is one of the most powerful outcomes of Brocklebank's project, which he called innovative.

"This son will remember these letters for the rest of his life, and I am sure, in part, they will save this son's life," Hinduja said. "I think what the mother is doing is fantastic."

Like school districts throughout the region, the Howard County public school system has anti-bullying policies. Rebecca Amani-Dove, spokeswoman for the district, would not comment on Noah's situation or the school's response, but said "student safety and security is the top priority of the school system."

Amani-Dove said school authorities respond to all reported bullying and cyber-bullying cases involving students by investigating the situation and providing social and emotional health services as necessary. The district also offers prevention and intervention programs as well as professional development for faculty, coaches, bus drivers and other staff. And students participate in activities, including International Day of Peace, No Name-Calling Week and Kindness Week.

Resources and outreach activities are also extended to parents, who are sent the brochure "What parents need to know about bully prevention in Howard County public schools," Amani-Dove said.

Howard County Executive Ken Ulman has focused on bullying, facilitating an open forum last May with Ravens running back Ray Rice and partnering with the schools and the Howard County Bar Foundation to show a screening of the documentary "Bully."

And in December, Ulman asked the School Safety Task Force to review bullying policies and procedures to find ways to strengthen them, including the creation of mobile applications to make reporting episodes of bullying easier. A report is due in March.

Brocklebank said Noah's school gave her a bullying incident form to fill out, organized meetings between her son and his bullies, and asked the boys that were picking on him to sign contracts pledging to stop.

Still, she said, the harassment continued and she wanted authorities to do more. For example, Brocklebank said, Noah sat alone in the cafeteria for two months and often skipped lunch.

The situation came to a head when Noah, who only recently received his parents' permission to open an Instagram account, uploaded the pictures showing tiny cuts on his arm and a caption with his suicide threat on Jan. 26. He blocked his mother from seeing the post.

Noah's friends and his friends' parents called the Brocklebanks to alert them while someone else who saw the post called 911 the following day. Brocklebank said police arrived and handcuffed Noah and took him in the cruiser to a local emergency room, where he was admitted for an eight-
day stay. His outpatient therapy is continuing, and he is being treated with medication for his depression, according to his mother.

Brocklebank said she had scheduled an emergency meeting with Noah's therapist, but once the 911 call was made, police took over the situation.

Howard police spokeswoman Sherry Llewellyn said officers are required to handcuff and transport individuals once police are notified that a person is a danger to himself.

Noah said he posted the Instagram messages because he wanted to "yell at the world" and let everyone know how blue he was feeling about the name-calling at school and the way other kids purposely left him out.

Every day he was in the hospital, Brocklebank said, she brought a handful of the letters with her. The family is still working with Noah on what she calls "safety goals," such as diverting negative thoughts by listening to music or talking to his parents when he feels sad. One of his friends has created an anti-bullying blog to show Noah support, Brocklebank said. A friend of a friend in Texas built the Letters for Noah website for the family, she said.

Noah's plan when he goes back to school Monday is to ignore the bullies.

"It's crazy how the world has shown me the light and how amazing it is and to ignore the bad parts," the seventh-grader said. "I still have depression, but I don't feel as extremely depressed as I was."

As for his mother, she said she is trying to "pay it forward" by finding a way for other teens to feel as loved as Noah has.

"I am speechless," Brocklebank said. "It is so humbling. It definitely restores my faith in humanity. It's overwhelming."