



"I went through my text messages to see the last time I told her I love her," says Leah Parsons on April 14. "It was a few days before this happened."

“  
When Rehtaeh was born, I promised her the world.  
**Now my beautiful girl is gone**”  
—LEAH PARSONS



Protesters outside the Halifax Regional Police Headquarters (April 14) called for an arrest.

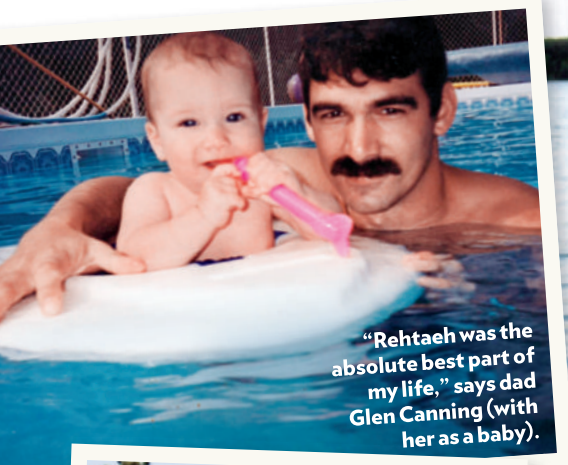
# REHTAEH PARSONS Shamed *into* Suicide

TAUNTED BY PEERS AFTER AN ALLEGED GANG RAPE, THE CANADIAN TEEN KILLED HERSELF. NOW HER FAMILY TALKS TO PEOPLE ABOUT THEIR FIGHT FOR JUSTICE

She knew something terrible had happened, but in the days after a party near her hometown of Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, 15-year-old Rehtaeh Parsons confided in nobody as she tried to piece together the hazy memories swirling in her head: Vodka drinks. Intense nausea. The click of a camera. Days later she arrived at Cole Harbour District High School

to discover students clustered in groups, looking alternately at her and at an image on their cell phones. Throughout the day, boys sidled up to her in hallways to whisper things like, “Hey, Rehtaeh, you mind if I do that?” and “You’d let me do that, right?” Finally she saw the photo, and the “that” became wrenchingly clear: It showed a male student





"Rehtaeh was the absolute best part of my life," says dad Glen Canning (with her as a baby).



Rehtaeh with sister Temyson, 9.



Rehtaeh hoped to campaign for animal rights. "At age 3," says Canning, "she'd run into the street to rescue worms from cars."

## “Rehtaeh loved people, but she learned not to trust them”

—ANGELLA PARSONS, COUSIN

pressed against her naked body in a sexual act, the boy flipping a thumbs-up as Rehtaeh vomited out a window. Returning home, Rehtaeh collapsed on the kitchen floor and, between sobs, told her mother and a cousin, "Everybody knows . . . I can't go back to school . . . I want to die."

On April 4, a year and a half after that alleged sexual assault by four schoolmates, Rehtaeh locked herself in her bathroom, looped a belt around her neck and hanged herself. Cut down by her frantic mother and rushed to a hospital, Rehtaeh lingered for three days before she was removed from life support. Though the details are unique, the situation is sadly familiar. On April 11

three 16-year-old boys were arrested in Northern California in connection with the sexual assault of Audrie Pott, 15, who hanged herself eight months ago after discovering, courtesy of graphic photos making the rounds on social media, that she'd been sexually abused while passed-out drunk at a party. A month earlier two high school football players were convicted of rape in Steubenville, Ohio, following a similar rape-and-gloat sequence of events. And the cases combining drinking, rape and online humiliation keep coming. "The law has to

catch up with technology," says Pott's family attorney Robert Allard, who would like to see suspects in such cases tried as adults. "The law has to recognize the harmful effects of cyberbullying."

In the eyes of her devastated family, it was neither the assault nor the humiliating photos that pushed Rehtaeh over the brink. Certainly she was furious about the assault. "I was raped, and I want everybody to know," she told her cousin Angella Parsons, 36. And she was so depressed about her subsequent social ostracism that she turned to marijuana, antidepressants and self-cutting to ease her misery. But, relatives say, what turned her anger to rage—rage that she seemingly then turned on herself—was law enforcement's decision, after a yearlong investigation, not to press charges because "there was no realistic prospect of conviction" based on the evidence, Chris Hansen, spokeswoman



FROM TOP: COURTESY PARSONS FAMILY (3); COURTESY POTT FAMILY

FROM TOP: COURTESY KATLEIGH CONNELL; INGRID BULLMER/CHRONICLE HERALD

for Nova Scotia Public Prosecution Service, told PEOPLE. "Rehtaeh said, 'No f---ing charges are gonna be laid; they're going to get away with this,'" Angella recalls. "Justice would have made a difference for Rae."

Until the assault, Rehtaeh had been an outgoing, straight-A student, given to speaking her mind. Always armed with a book, "she read everything," says her friend Kelsey Patterson. "She loved school." Passionate about all living creatures, Rehtaeh dreamed of becoming a marine biologist or an animal-rights attorney. Typical of her caring nature, she once called Animal Control Services because she felt neighbors had left their dog outside too long. On trips to Halifax to visit her father, they couldn't walk anywhere "without her asking me for change to give to someone in need," her dad, Glen Canning, 50, a writer, posted online. In Nova Scotia, where she lived with her mom, Leah Parsons (who never married Canning), and her two younger sisters, "she had a huge network of friends," says Leah, 46. "We had kids at our house all the time."

That changed dramatically after the photo of Rehtaeh went viral. At school the kids called her "slut." Boys she didn't even know began texting her, asking to have sex; nearly all of her female friends cut her off. "When her friends turned against her, that sent her over the edge," Leah says. Ashamed and lonely, Rehtaeh transferred to another school. "She lasted about two or three weeks," says Leah. She also found no relief in therapy, telling Leah, "I'm too young to deal with all these feelings." Her solution? Keep moving. In succession she admitted herself to a hospital, moved in with her dad and attended a Halifax school, returned to Dartmouth and enrolled in yet another school. But she rarely attended classes. When she'd spot one of her attackers, "she would have panic attacks," says Leah. "She would have problems breathing." She also smoked a lot of dope.

In recent months she'd shown signs of trying to regain control of her life. She got a dramatic tattoo: crows flying around her neck. "I think she was saying, 'Yeah, this is *my* body,'" says

Angella. Rehtaeh also made new friends, found a boyfriend and began seeing a new therapist. She eventually put together a résumé to hunt for a job. She also stopped smoking weed. "I want to get better," she told Angella. But free of her marijuana-induced fog, Rehtaeh also became more prone to erupting in anger and thoughts of suicide. Even so, those closest to her don't believe she meant to kill herself. "I think she just had an explosion of anger," says her boyfriend Mike Wells, 21.

In the wake of Rehtaeh's death, her family finally sees some light: Canadian police have reopened the investigation into her rape, citing "new and credible information." More than 460,000 people have signed a petition demanding an independent investigation into how police handled the earlier probe. And the kids who bullied her? "Most of the people that were mean to her feel bad now," says her friend Hannah Goldsworthy. Certainly there is more than enough guilt to go around. As her dad wrote on his website: "My daughter wasn't bullied to death, she was disappointed to death. Disappointed in people she thought she could trust, her school, and the police. She was my daughter, but she was your daughter too. For the love of God do something."

By Jill Smolowe and Janine Rayford. Reported by Caitlin Keating in New York City and Elaine Aradillas and Ken Lee in Los Angeles



## A Survivor's Story

I was violently raped in college by a popular guy I flirted with at an off-campus party on May 6, 2011. He spread rumors it was consensual. When I returned to school that fall, strangers (and some friends) called me a bitch, whore or slut for months. I felt like garbage. After panic attacks and nightmares, I tried to OD on pills, but a friend intervened. In March 2012 my car was keyed and my tires slashed. But I faced each day because I didn't want my rapist to win. I got better through therapy and loving support from family. There's nothing I can't overcome now. I survived. —Kayleigh Connell, 22, High Point, N.C.



Some 300 supporters gathered for a vigil in Halifax on April 11. "There's a lot of shock and anger," said organizer El Jones.

## Another Teen Suicide

Just days after Rehtaeh Parsons died, a similar case captured headlines when three 16-year-old boys from California were arrested on suspicion of sexual battery and distribution of photographs. After a night of drinking on Sept 2, 2012, Audrie Pott woke up at her friend's home with explicit scribbles on her half-naked body. "I cried when I found out what they did," she later wrote on Facebook. "The whole school is talking about it. My life is over." Several days later she hanged herself in the family home. "The epidemic of sexual assault and cyberbullying needs to stop," says her father, Larry Pott. Her case is not unique, says the family lawyer Robert Allard. "It's not just Ohio; it's not just Nova Scotia. This is becoming a problem in our society."