

# INSIDER NJ

*SPECIAL EDITION*



## Addressing Youth Mental Health in New Jersey



**A JOURNEY &  
DESTINATION**



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“This wasn’t Mallory and the four girls who didn’t like her – it was Mallory the four girls who didn’t like her, and their 800 followers.”

Very few people understand youth mental health like Diane Grossman of Rockaway Twp., whose beautiful little girl Mallory Rose five years ago endured the abuse of her peers on Snapchat before succumbing to suicide.

She was 12 years old.

Mallory’s Law subsequently came about through the bipartisan work of state Senator Joe Pennacchio (R-26) and Senator Patrick Diegnan (D-18). Specifically, S-1790 amended New Jersey’s Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights with requirements on school districts to help prevent and respond to bullying incidents.

“The Legislature has aggressively moved to control bullying in our schools, but it hasn’t been enough,” Pennacchio said at the time. “Today, victims of bullying are prone to attack 24 hours a day by schoolmates or rivals texting from their phones or flexing social media muscles online.

“This bill requires school and county officials to address bullying before it gets out of control, and makes it clear that districts, school officials and parents have a defined responsibility to protect children from aggressions that can occur on and off school property, on the internet, or by text,” Pennacchio added.

But it persists in spiraling out of control, in school and out of school, and online, and it builds to the point where another beautiful young girl, in this case Adriana Kuch of Berkeley Twp., who earlier this year got jumped in a gang-land style ambush, beaten, and filmed while her attackers threw punches, committed suicide. The laws on the books, responsive, well-crafted, and made in good conscience, could not prevent the cessation of another young and beautiful broken heart.

Mallory and Adriana – gone; and the rest of us left behind to figure out where we went wrong, and what we might do to prevent another catastrophic outcome, another child’s death.

Do we truly need more laws if the laws on the books fail to prevent more loss of life?

Mallory’s Law could not spare us the need now

---

for Adriana's Law.

How many more lives then, dogs us like a dreadful question, and how many more laws?

Where do the deeper demands lie within our society, not within the laws necessarily but at the human heart of the matter?

Diane Grossman, who runs Mallory's Army named in honor of our fallen daughter, says more than new laws we need refinement of our existing laws, in addition to vigilant assurance that the money the legislature approves for enabled programs effectively reaches the children it purports to serve.

"We have a good baseline for legislation," she told InsiderNJ. "New Jersey has done an excellent job in the statute. That said, there are areas where we can expand the states HIB or Harassment Intimidation and Bullying laws."

We need professionals in the schools to have better training to recognize troubles before they metastasize.

We need to stop using terms like "Blue Ribbon Schools" to absolve ourselves of the keener responsibilities of our communities and specifically those who staff our schools, to the unseen child or children, who don't necessarily fit into a ready category.

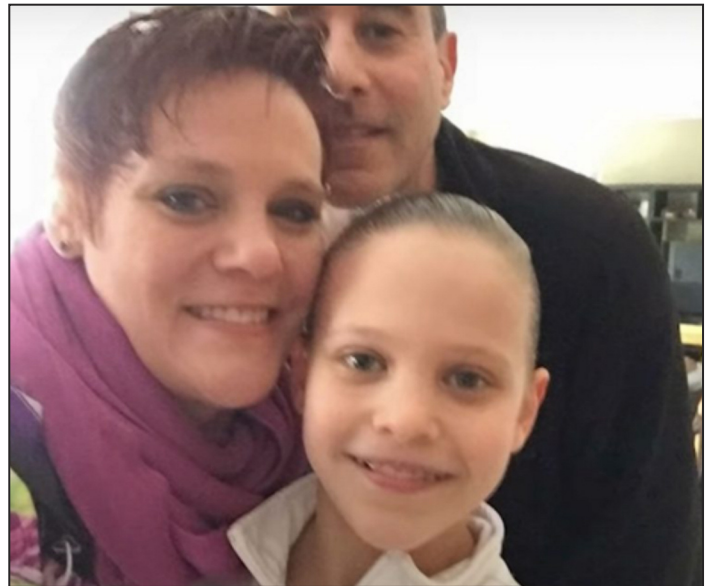
"Lawmakers do a good job," said Grossman, "but we need to take a harder look to see where the gaps are failing and on that basis, revamp the NJ HIB. Even since that law first went on the books [in the aftermath of Rutgers student Tyler Clementi's suicide in 2010], apps have changed and technology has changed. We have to make sure our current laws are relevant and run parallel

with what is happening."

We need to pay closer attention to children, and train adults to pay closer attention, and children, too. "In New Jersey, we close school for teacher conventions," she said. "Explain to me why that is not the perfect place for mandated attendance for training and guest speakers like myself."

How do we know, for example, when to tell a child to tough it out, versus reading the warning signs of a child's implosion and listening?

"There needs to be a healthy balance between the two," said Grossman. "It's possible to suck it up through training. The fact is that bullying is really bad behavior."



We can change children's behavior, and our own behavior, with better training – and we must restore, to the core, a sense of accountability and the recognition of consequences, Grossman argues.

"I often say in my talks we cannot legislate the moral compass," she said. "Our own morality, not the law, has to teach us to tell people not to kill themselves. We also have to understand kids

are going to be kids. They are going to tell kids to kill themselves. We are so busy worrying that our kids are not singled out, but when children can predict the consequences of their behavior, we will see change. Our kids don't sufficiently experience consequences. Our children are skipping that part, and consequently they are not resilient. They are impulsive. We are so focused on empowering our children, the pendulum swung too far in the other direction to the idea that our children can do no wrong. They are growing up with a false sense of perfection. The entire system needs to be dealt with, and that includes the public school system's insistence on injecting behavioral issues into education issues."

*"The other students  
who attacked,  
beat and filmed  
Miss Kuch while she  
wailed in agony,  
need to go to jail.  
They don't need to  
be coddled."*

New Jersey, says Grossman, does a horrible job of throwing money at problems.

Before we write any new laws, or blow up laws to supplant them with new ones, or make chains of names of children lost, we need to ensure the effective delivery of resources to the children.

"Our heart is broken because our brain is broken," Grossman said. "Pediatricians should be screening for mental health, yes, but the school system needs to be very careful with this – slapping a scarlet letter on children. Understand, Mallory's first attempt at suicide was her only attempt. This is not a mental health crisis this is an *impulsive* crisis. Our children – they are not a 50-year-old man whose life is over. They are responding to the actions *that day*. But these days are different from ours. Adriana Kuch, for example, responded not to a school fight. That was a calculated attack that is gang-like. That is not a school fight where we would just fight it out.

"Understand - it wasn't Mallory and the four girls who didn't like her – it was Mallory the four girls who didn't like her, and their 800 followers."



Now I have to remember you for longer than I knew you.

**Justice for Adriana Kuch**  
**03/11/08 – 02/03/23**



**MENTAL  
HEALTH  
AWARENESS  
MONTH**  
— MAY —

# The Road to Accountability Begins with The Consequences: Justice for Adriana Kuch



Rehabilitation should not supplant justice, and in this case, the juvenile thugs who attacked and sadistically filmed their attack of the late Adriana Kuch of Bayville in a school hallway, must receive proper justice.

We cannot treat this merely as an opportunity “to reform troubled youth,” or to scrounge around for ways to somehow justify the unspeakable behavior of those who attacked – in the most cowardly way – an innocent victim.

The other students who attacked, beat and filmed Miss Kuch while she wailed in agony, need to go to jail.

They don't need to be coddled.

We don't need to put them on a couch and figure out what went wrong and why they unleashed vicious violence on Miss Kuch.

They need to be summarily prosecuted and punished.

They need to suffer just retribution for their heinous crime.

They need to rightfully suffer the consequences of awful and vile actions wrought. They need to serve as a human deterrent to those who think our society can rectify these thugs' surprise beating of a young and defenseless woman by mollifying criminal behavior. Keep in mind these thugs also filmed their beating in real time with phone

cameras and later posted it on social media.

Apparently, by posting that video, they had confidence that they could skirt justice, or lacked all concept of justice in the belief that in publicizing their crime, they would receive social validation.

We must send a message that we will not tolerate this barbaric and violent act.

We have not collectively crossed the line into acquiescence to a cowardly gang nightmare.



No. Emphatically, no.

The juveniles who attacked Adriana Kuch in the hallway need to go to jail.

This case reflects back so much horror, so much incompetence and awful behavior, by scared and/or callous and thoughtless adults in positions of power; people like former superintendent Tri-

antafillos Parlapanides, who in a school email to reporters wrote of a grieving father in the aftermath of Adriana Kuch's death, "[He] is very upset and has lost his child so sometimes you have to eat the sh-t sandwich."

Mercifully, he resigned.

But the professional deflation of adults who can't take responsibility for the horrific injustice that occurred at Central Jersey High School on Feb. 1st should not obfuscate the central appalling act.

All juveniles, and so charged, three of the four girls who attacked Ms. Kuch stand accused of conspiracy to commit aggravated assault, while one of them is charged with aggravated assault, according to Ocean County Prosecutor Bradley Billheimer.

It's all on camera.

The parents in Bayville determined to find justice in our society behind merely probation and mental health treatment for the perpetrators of that crime, deserve a demonstration of our justice system righteously at work in this case.

So does Adriana Kuch, it goes without saying – but she's not around anymore.

She won't receive the benefit of mental health treatment.

While the courts address that case, and by the grace of God, summon a way to administer proper punishment, the New Jersey Legislature continues to fashion a policy response to the fiasco. As it stands, recording an assault and posting it online is not illegal.

Right now, lawmakers are examining a two-prong



anti-bullying law that includes a zero-tolerance policy requiring school officials to contact law enforcement any and every time an assault on a minor takes place within the school. The contact with law enforcement will occur in addition to normal student discipline. Also, the law would ensure consequences for people who video tape and share an assault of a minor/student via text or social media.

That is useful, to be sure.

We have much more to do, certainly.

We must persist – against the odds – in the fervent belief that we can create a civilized society.

Part of what it means to be civilized is to accept the consequences of our actions, to teach our children the same; and to appropriately punish those who harm our precious children – even those who are young themselves, if we truly still believe in imparting a lesson; if there is any hope left, in fact, for justice to be done in the savage attack of a young and beautiful spirit, lost in our midst. We restore a foundation for mental health when we insist on accountability.





# Youth Mental Health: “Let’s Hear what the Kids Think,” Say Senators Codey and Diegnan.



State Senator Pat Diegnan (D-18) and former Governor Dick Codey (senator from the 27th District) want to hear from prime players impacted by a society struggling to address youth mental health.

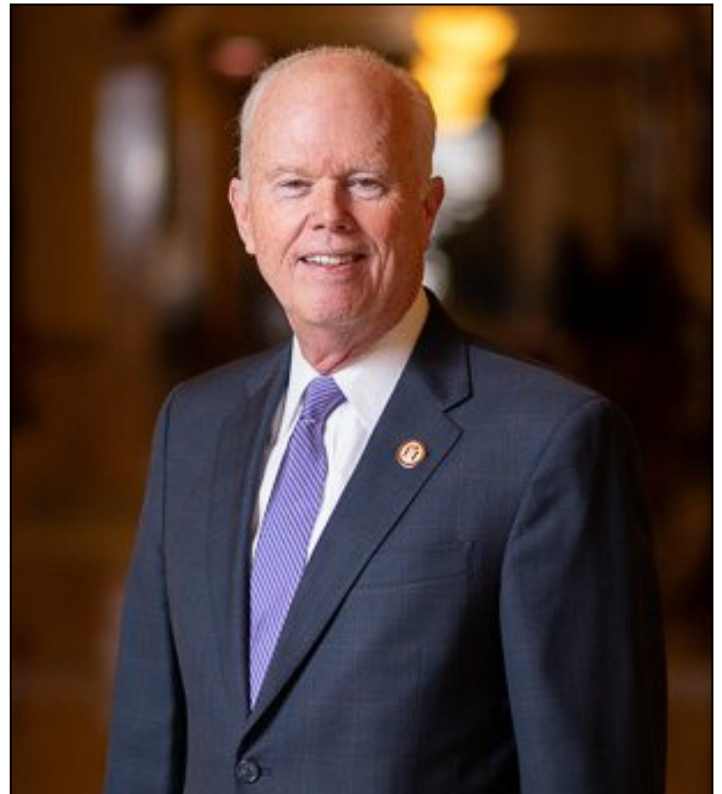
The senators want to hear from youth.

To that end, the allies from Essex and Middlesex have crafted legislation that would form a committee of adolescents and Trenton lawmakers working in concert to come up with solutions.

“In many ways, they are occupying a world that is a totally different world than the one we occupy, or certainly than the one we occupied when we were growing up,” Diegnan told InsiderNJ. “Too often, the last people we ask to find solutions to problems are those people first impacted. This bill tries to avoid that, by giving the kids a platform.”

Diegnan said the bill would assemble one child or adolescent from each of New Jersey’s 21 counties, joined by four lawmakers.

“Let’s see what the kids think,” Diegnan said.





# New Beginnings, Repeated Endings



The late Hubert Humphrey reminded us that we judge a society based on how we respond to the needs of the most vulnerable: the elderly, the infirm and our children. But even poor Humphrey, attuned to human suffering by virtue of training and disposition and organizational principles at the core of the country, couldn't have comprehended the barbarism we have hatched, bad enough in our brutal disposal of the aged (just look at the heaped deaths in assisted living homes during COVID), and downright monstrous when it comes to our treatment of the young.

As we indulge the hurt feelings of grown men at microphones whose whining would undoubtedly make Winston Churchill hang his head in shame, consider the fact that American children grow up now with the expectation of someone weighed down by paramilitary gear, clamoring over a hill

and firing his way into their school and killing them. In New Jersey, we console ourselves in part by imposing the toughest gun laws in the country, which limit to ten the number of bullets per gun magazine, even as our corrupt politics require ever bigger and more and more impersonal schools to feed the demands of rampant development, the private prize for those who buy our public resources.

No, we seem to tell ourselves in rapt suburban obeisance, the oddball loaded down with AR-15s will not penetrate the security of our schools, any more than someone could blast into a penitentiary.

I drop my daughter off at school sometimes. Even Roger Waters' most tortured, shrieking Pink Floyd visions couldn't conceive a world like the

one my kid faces in those dark morning hours where traffic backs into infinity, cops scream and flail, and unidentified forms – apparently human – in uniforms, either reinforce – or undo with a vengeance – the cops’ commands. Tugging her backpack over a shoulder as she grips the handle of the car door, looking like a cherry dangling over a drop-zone in Vietnam, my daughter routinely gives me a last look of resigned amusement, as if to say, “It is horrible, dad, but it’s my world, the world you gave me, and I still have enough patience to refrain from condemning you, even as you condemn me.” This, I think, as she heads for the building that resembles a police precinct in the original Mad Max movie - is a world that has prioritized everything – *everything* – but the health and well-being of a precious child. No, maybe some nutjob who thinks he’s the Joker won’t appear on the hill today. The kids will just kill one another off within their own walls – filming one another while they do it so they can keep the world of TikTok entertained.

Watching the campus (yes, that is the preferred word in town to denote a sprawling prison yard) devour the humpbacked hooded figures, my kid



among them, words come back to me, the words of former Assemblyman Jason O’Donnell (D-31) (pictured), a fireman by trade, who responded to the World Trade Center on 9/11: “I run into burning buildings for a living. But the day I felt most vulnerable was the day I dropped my daughter Caroline off to school for the first time.” Maybe I could talk to O’Donnell, he’d understand; ah, but he got jammed up, I forgot. Corruption charges.

*“If you are always  
fighting the  
parents, you are putting  
your focus in the  
wrong place.  
Stop trying to fix  
problems by punishing  
the innocent.”*

Was he too naïve for this game; too earnestly convinced a school should actually protect children?

My daughter deposited, I head for a local coffee shop (the bars are not yet open) and the comforts of complete virtual immersion. I’m shaken and stirred. Each time immensely discomfited, in the name of mobilizing all will in the direction of the enemy, I double down, determined to believe my daughter – for why is it she can’t be tough enough to digest the wretched, toxic, inhuman, deoxy-

generated, prison-like atmosphere without complaint – is the problem.

Ah, they tell me, “Dad, it’s ok. We’ll take care of her. Don’t worry.”

For when our children exhibit signs of dislocation and fatigue and duress in this lucrative labyrinth that supposedly contains something resembling a school, and the minotaur invariably comes to roost on our kids’ mental health, we – for the most part puzzled and perplexed (for how can we endure anything that distracts us from the ongoing conveyor belt of virtual productivity?) – reach for – among other things - our reliable alternative political inflatable dual familiars: drugs and psychology, to aid the afflicted, even as we condemn them by hurtling onward with an agenda unaltered.

Hand over hand.

Step by step.

Donald Trump is outraged that someone said something negative about him.

Chris “Mistakes were Made” Christie is running for president as an alternative to Trump.

These are deep and important distinctions, after all – adult-level decisions.

Somewhere in a state faraway, another gunman enters another school and annihilates another five or ten or 15 or 20 children. And then, and then, our protected blue state politicians express outrage while our protected red state pols ask us to pray and we collectively pay homage to the developers and the pharmacologists and psychologists who keep the payroll intact and coddle ourselves with freeze-dried phrases (“Folks are

angry,” “Folks are enraged,” “Folks gets to gets paid”), and sandwiched between shooting victims, Ukrainian soldiers keeping the Russians pinned down, we settle back to life in America, and blame the social media-deranged kid who strays.

The festering rage has almost completely successfully overtaken me. “That kid... that kid... she will RESPECT ME and society. How dare she not figure out whom to back – Christie or Trump or Joe (Phil Murphy’s officially out of the race now) Biden in her preparation for citizenship in our beloved country?

How. Dare. She.

But then it comes back.

It comes back.

It always comes back.



Amid the bodies, the carnage of children (6K American kids a year die by the gun; the child on the screen yesterday; the flashback to the child at Columbine; the child whose head I held in my hands on asphalt - surely, he will be okay, the helicopter came for him; they’ll get him to a trauma center in timely fashion, yes, what a shame we overdeveloped this area and made it impossible to even cross a street in front of a strip mall, but then again, these kids... these kids...).

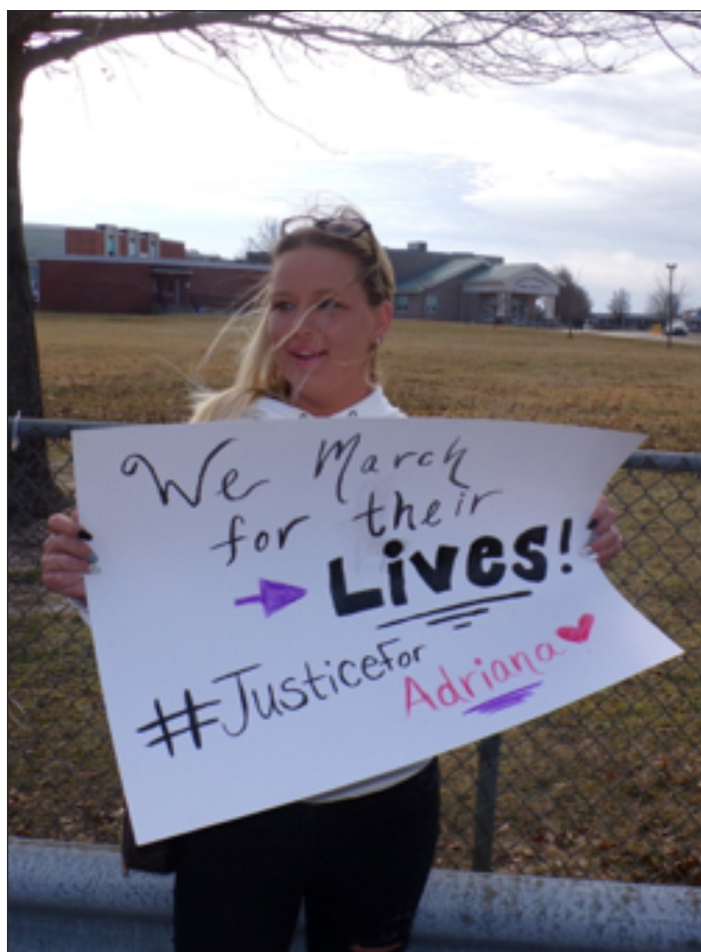
*They're* the problem.

Right?

Right?

Please say yes so I can sink back into binge watching Miami Vice episodes from the 1980s and not be bothered with the hazards of now.

In a void the faces return, and won't go away, of every child slain going back to Columbine, and the ones who killed themselves, for they couldn't contain the sorrows, and as we writhe in the torpor of our own sins and strangle ourselves with pleasure, they refuse to disappear.



Since February, one keeps coming back with them and remains; for between the shootings and the pedestrian fatalities and the beatings, what hap-

pened in that hallway in Central Regional High School in Bayville circles, like an unceasing note of foreboding, like the chorus of a funeral dirge that refuses to resolve, which won't permit closure, as they say. On that day, four girls with phones in their hands attacked an unsuspecting victim, Adriana Kuch, and beat her senseless while giggling and laughing and filming their attack. They posted their little movie; and two days later, amid the ensuing anonymous ridicule of TikTok hobgoblins, Adriana Kuch committed suicide.

Adriana Kuch.

"I used to be a student here," said Halie Engesser at the first meeting of the Board of Education following the Central Regional High School student's death. "I moved away because of gun threats made on me by another student – and now I'm back because Adriana was a friend of mine. I'm wearing her sweatshirt right now. I got the call at seven in the morning. I was in denial. I was supposed to hang out with her last week. She wanted to be a tattoo artist. She never liked any violence."

"These children do not feel safe coming to school," said parent John Galifi of Bayville. "Your job is to care – to the best of your abilities. ... If you are always fighting the parents, you are putting your focus in the wrong place. Stop trying to fix problems by punishing the innocent."

In the street outside the school, Brianna O'Brien, daughter of Sean O'Brien, tearfully told reporters of the routine bullying she endured at Central Regional High School, as the administration did nothing.

Adriana Kuch.

"I'm hoping, with Adriana's father's blessing, that they implement a new policy at the school, which



is that if a child goes to the administration to report a bullying incident, and nothing happens, the administration is held accountable,” activist mother Breana Renda (pictured, below) told InsiderNJ in the parking lot of the 7-11 across from the sprawling high school. “When it comes to social media, I don’t agree with them taking away kids’ phones. It’s important for them to have the phones to protect themselves, and they’re our reporters in the school but if a child is attacked and that attack is posted with malicious intent, the administration, children who attacked, and the parents, are all held accountable.”

It’s something, after all.

Adriana’s Law.

That’s what the state legislature promised: a law named after the victim.

But Adriana didn’t seem like a victim. She seemed like a tough kid, a tough good kid; the kind of kid who stood up to bullies on behalf of others. A father spoke on condition of anonymity, in the interest of protecting his son, who is older now. But he spoke passionately about Adriana Kuch, who once berated a bully in defense of his son. “She stood up and yelled, ‘Stop doing that,’” the father said.

That was the memory he had of the girl later attacked in the high school hallway by bullies and beaten.

Prosecutors earlier this year announced charges against the four girls who perpetrated the Feb. 1 attack on their classmate at Central Regional High School. The charges came the same day that friends and family honored the memory of Bayville’s Adriana Kuch at a memorial service.

From NBC News: “One student has been charged with aggravated assault, two were charged with conspiracy to commit aggravated assault, and the fourth person faces a harassment charge, according to the Ocean County Prosecutor’s Office. All of those whom were charged are juveniles, and because of that, have not been identified. The prosecutor’s office added that each of the four, along with their respective guardians, were served with a copy of the criminal complaint against them and were released pending future court appointments.”

But few had any belief in the system.

Few believed the process would produce justice.

We watched the video repeatedly.



I’ve watched the video ten, 20, 30 times. Maybe it’s because I’ve seen my own daughter go into the same ball of self-protection, or maybe I’ve thought that’s how she would look if she were under siege, the victim of a cowardly surprise attack. Or maybe Adriana Kuch...

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Under siege?

Wasn't that a movie?

No. It's the feeling a child has in high school right now, if she isn't already dead.

It's the feeling Adriana had when they broke her nose; when that one girl whaled on her and drew blood and sent her to the nurse's office where no one saw fit to call the cops.

The scourge of social media ensued: voices from nowhere adding laughter on top of laughter: condemnation and sadism and scorn. Amid thousands of children, a precious child fell off the tightrope, while untold others dangle in various suspended attitudes of unrest and distress.

"New Jersey children and teenagers desperately need our help. In the Garden State alone, 38,000 more youth are facing depression and anxiety now than 6 years ago, according to a recent study," said Dr. Tara Chalakani, CEO, Preferred Behavioral Health Group. "We've seen suicide-linked hospital admissions jump 95% from 2019-2021. And according to recent CDC data, nearly 3 in 5 (57%) U.S. teen girls felt persistently sad or hopeless in 2021. We, as a society, need to take our children's mental health as seriously as we do their physical wellness. Mental health is health, and our children are facing a crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It's time to eradicate the stigma surrounding mental health issues and get our children and teens the treatment they need and deserve."

Susan Tellone, Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide, in March told the Senate Education Committee, "Our students are in crisis." In the aftermath of Adriana Kuch's suicide, Tellone spoke at the invitation of the committee in re-

sponse to the significant uprising in teen suicide, especially among girls.

"Whatever we decide to do we need to think about what works in schools," Tellone told the committee.

"The U.S. suicide rate among 15-to-24-year-olds grew by 7% in 2021, according to preliminary data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention," according to a report earlier this year in NJ.com. "And several New Jersey hospital networks reported their emergency rooms were flooded in 2022 with anxious, depressed and suicidal teens."

"I've never seen it like this [in 40 years in the profession as a nurse]," Tellone said.

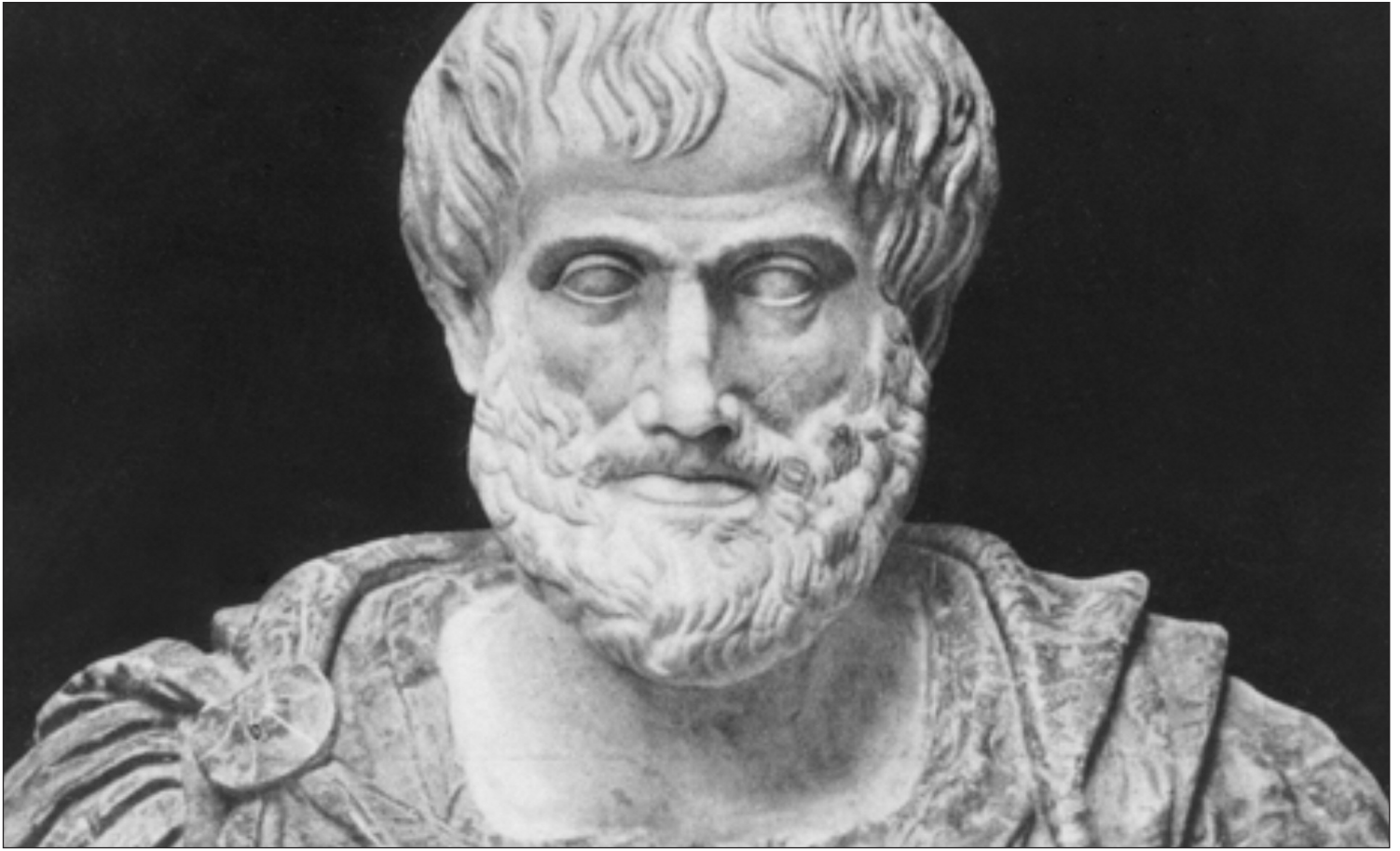
'What has caused [the crisis]?' state Senator Shirley Turner (D-15) wanted to know.



Tellone mentioned constant stimulation from social media and the political climate, including constant school shootings.

Mary Abrams of New Jersey Association of Mental Health & Addiction Agencies (NJAMHAA) added that the COVID-19 pandemic added trauma to young lives on the scale of a world war.





# Politics

*“Man is a political animal. A man who lives alone is either a Beast or a God” – Aristotle.*

How do we negotiate the infernal politics of these dreadful times, politics that would sacrifice children to the times sooner than produce a time of reckoning for the guilty? Under the body count, adult males wail about their suffering (“I, too, am a victim!”) in a fashion that suggests full conversion to victimhood as a substitute for being a man, let alone a leader.

“We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the

beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender, and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God’s good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old.”

Look at those words by Winston Churchill.

Then look at these by U.S. Senator Marco Rubio of Florida:

“What is happening right now in Miami and Fort Lauderdale with gasoline is crazy. You can’t find gasoline anywhere, this has been going on since

Sunday and they are blaming it on floods that impacted the port and I know that was a factor but it has been four days. This should have been figured out by now. They are blaming it on consumer panic. Yeah, people are panicked because they have got to get to work. They have got places to go and you either can't find gas or you have to wait in line for like two hours down the street. This is where you are probably going to run out of gas while you are waiting.



So, yeah, people are panicked, of course they are filling up, saying 'don't fill up,' of course you are going to fill up. This is because you don't know the next time you are going to have to wait in a two-hour line. They keep saying it is going to get better but it is not. They have got to get this thing fixed, this is crazy."

The leader has submitted to craziness, therefore he has done his job.

He is like me.

I, too, am bothered by people who don't fix things.

I, too, rail about it.

So does Marco, a United States Senator.

Marco and I are alike.

I like what is alike to me.

It gives me peace.

Insanity gives me peace.

Public unaccountability gives me a greater sense of anonymous unaccountability.

It means I don't have to think, or speak, for after all, let's face it, our insistence on unrefined English produces not merely inelegant expression (the language of politics fast devolves to the language of profanity to the idiom of pornography), but a language of – yes – unaccountability.

*A culture of unaccountability.*

I *like* when I don't have to be accountable.

It proves wrong all those unhip teachers of mine who said otherwise.

Joe Fili, my high school English teacher, frantically passed out photocopies of George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language," while railing about politicians' preference for the passive voice. "The money was washed," shrieked Fili, as if imparting a cornerstone of citizenship mattered. If we accept the passive public voice, he cried, in purely political terms we assume a passive posture and gradually, while absolving ourselves of the demands of democracy, diminishing the accountability of our elected servants.

In horror, I came to realize, I lived long enough to hear a lawyer – in the most inarticulate way – try to tell me to rewrite a story to eliminate the subject (his client) in order to craft ungrammatical nothingness; and a governor, Chris Christie,

now jockeying for the presidency, say in the aftermath of Bridgegate, “Mistakes were made.”

Somewhere, I’m guessing, Joe Fili played his bluegrass fiddle in overdrive, so he wouldn’t have to hear how the din of these excruciating grammatical short cuts truncate not only thought, but our very belief that we might establish any public good.

Our inability to communicate comes at an especially inopportune time, as our access to mass entertainment enables us to more easily extricate ourselves from the urgent public requirements of America. We abbreviate the universe into language that may not correspond with reality, but which we understand.

I don’t have time.

The institutions will take up the slack.

The schools. The churches. The fam – oh, that’s supposed to be me, well, then, the grandmothers. Yes.

When I observe my peers, I see many of them retreating into the rearview mirror images of our virtual past. Confronted with the mind-numbing present, one friend has become a walking regurgitation of 1960s popular culture. He grew up watching Monkees reruns on TV and listening to their hits. To cope with contemporary incomprehensibility, he simplifies himself into his former world and stays there, only occasionally venturing into the rediscovery of other past correspondences. Another friend, terrified of actually facing the present, remains a spiritually static presence aboard the Starship Enterprise, continually replaying the associations of Captain Kirk and company in order to merely remain upright amid the onslaught of cultural confusion.



“Only the artist in conflict with the present gives the pattern recognition,” said Marshal McLuhan, but we, I suppose, have resigned ourselves to being the opposite of artists and so made our “contribution,” if regurgitating past patterns can be called a contribution. Born the Vietnam era, we learned to retreat into atmospheric comfort zones in simply an earlier era of the same eternally reanimated horrors. Ah, but we didn’t fight that war. Our dads did, though, and then we had to fight them.

So begins the epic of another victim. *Another Vietnam victim.*

“I went out to dinner the other night,” my friend told me just the other day.

“All the kids at the adjoining tables were on their phones,” I told her.

“No,” she said. “The *adults*. The adults were all on their phones. No one was talking.”

In the frontier a father might give his son or daughter woodsman’s skills. Now, we cede our children those worlds we cut and paste from a lifetime of Internet surfing and expect them to make sense of it, and order and organize a collage we substituted for what we received, namely the forms and fury of Picasso.

The institutions will figure it out.

And yet... and yet...

Going back to Vietnam certainly and then Watergate and Iraq, and the brimming patronage troughs of almost any New Jersey municipality in our midst, we do not trust that our institutions will do more good than harm.



As I said once to Assemblywoman Nancy Munoz (R-21) (pictured), a nurse by trade before she became a politician: “You spent the first half of life helping people, and the second half hurting people.”

It was a joke, of course, made – in fact – to emphasize the work of a public servant who actually does understand the priority of helping people, in a culture without an adequate trust factor.

Consider this:

In 2020, the Pew Research Center ascertained that just 20% of U.S. adults say they trust the government in Washington to “do the right thing” just about always or most of the time.

Twenty percent.

And consider this, from FiveThirtyEight:

“[The] sense of dissatisfaction showed up in a recent poll from Gallup, which asked Americans how much confidence they have in various institutions. The survey found that since last June, when Gallup last asked this set of questions, Americans’ confidence in almost every institution has dropped. In the poll, which was conducted before the justices released their decision on abortion but after a draft of the opinion leaked, the biggest shifts were for the presidency, which saw a 15-percentage-point drop, and the Supreme Court, which saw an 11-point drop. But overall, the national mood is sour. Americans’ average confidence in 14 of the institutions that Gallup asked about was only at 27 percent — the lowest point since Gallup began the survey in 1979.”







# College Access



More than half of Americans believe it's unlikely younger people today will have better lives than their parents, according to a new poll from the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. Most of those polled prioritize raising a family and owning a home, but, as we kill the planet, more than half described those goals as "harder to achieve compared with their parents' generation." Among younger people, about seven in 10 Americans under 30 think homeownership has become harder to achieve.

About half of those polled also said it's hard for them to improve their own standards of living, with many citing both economic conditions and structural factors. According to the Economic

Policy Institute, the federal minimum wage in 2021 was worth 34 percent less than in 1968, when its purchasing power peaked. "Many people perceive their options are less than what they had in the past," said University of Chicago professor Steven Durlauf, who helped construct the study. "A lot of sense of well-being has to do with relative status, not absolute status."

The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement: In November 2021, many observers looked to the gubernatorial elections in New Jersey and Virginia to gauge whether the trends of high voter engagement we saw in 2020 would continue and to draw potential lessons for the 2022 midterms. Immediately after those contests, we used exit polling data to produce an early estimate of 25% (+/- 3.6 margin

of error) youth turnout in Virginia—data for New Jersey was not available.

The disconnect endures. Or rather, our connectivity to politics and government persists as another facet of the illness that bombards us through TikTok and Snapchat. Thoughtlessness supplants thought. Rage stamps out debate. Frothing at the mouth entertains. Discussion doesn't translate.

Nothing penetrates, as public policy fails to rise to the level of wrathful sloganeering.

You will hear New Jersey Democrats talk about climate change, and you will hear them act like Republicans are the main impediment to getting something done about the problem. You will also hear Republicans chasing woefully after the political base of a former President – with his own scandalous history of development in this state – who last year zestfully did the blow by blow beside a prizefight ring as 58-year-old Evander Holyfield nearly got his head taken off. But you will not hear anyone on the campaign trail discuss

*“If we lack trust  
at the core  
of our society, what  
can we  
reliably leave our  
children except  
a heightened sense  
of distrust?”*

– with substance or any institutional awareness or any sense of moral righteousness or real credibility – the issue of *land use* in New Jersey and how our unwise, clubby, greedy practices have intensified the hazards of our suicidal condition in the aftermath of a storm that killed 29 people in “the Garden State,” among them Daphne Lopez Del Bono, a college student who drowned in her car.

We won't hear that discussion because both political parties lie together, like Romulus and Remus, in the suckled manger of the same coffers-filling mangy wolf called corporate overdevelopment. That's why the state specializes in giant box construction of the kind we saw in Camden, for example, courtesy of an \$11.5 billion bipartisan state tax incentive package, which has nothing to do with improving the lives or opportunities of actual people already struggling on the ground.

Corporate giveaways in a food desert.

Moreover, “the global loss of wildlife is ‘significantly more alarming’ than previously thought, according to a new study that found almost half the planet's species are experiencing rapid population declines. Humans have already wiped out huge numbers of species and pushed many more to the brink – with some scientists saying we are entering a ‘sixth mass extinction’ event, this time driven by humans.”

The invasive species we feverishly create in our bulldozed world finds massive virtual duplication in the invasive species of social media reverberating in the brains of our children.

From the Encyclopedia of New Jersey on the Township of Holmdel, “In 1986 residential development of vacant land began. By 1996, 67%

of barren land, 13% of agricultural land and two percent of forest area had been developed.” “As of the 2020 United States census, the township's population was 17,400, an increase of 627 (+3.7%) from the 2010 census count of 16,773,[22][23] which in turn reflected an increase of 992 (+6.3%) from the 15,781 counted in the 2000 census.”

But the kids are the problem.

The kids, the kids, the kids are the problem.

So, who cares if we don't trust our political system anymore? We'll have our hands full, like the parents in Ray Bradbury's *The Veldt*, fighting our own children in our living rooms.



A few years ago, Elizabeth Mayor Chris Bollwage and Woodbridge Mayor John McCormac (pictured, with Governor Phil Murphy) occupied a pair of D.C. barstools, and considered the following question: “What's the most important word in politics?”

A big smiling McCormac pounced out of a crouch. He gave an immediate answer, and a good one: candid and unrehearsed.

“Relationships,” he said.

Politics and its optimal function depend on the crafting, maintaining and fruition – in the truest sense – of relationships.

Bollwage thought about his friend's answer.

Then he gave his own answer.



“Trust,” said Bollwage.

He spoke the word almost with a kind of gasped finality, as though he had mused on McCormac's response, considered it well spoken, and refined it into a word that incorporated the same meaning but with a key enhancement.

Trust. Yes, that goes to the crux, and well struck it helps many not merely the well-fed few. But the disconnect jars at all levels, for if trust determines the coziness of the practitioners of establishment politics, its opposite results when their cocoon produces little that reflects a public interest. At this moment, I sit in a New Jersey town turned upside down, heavy equipment blocking key in-

tersections, jackhammering constant, police in the roadways - all to further the interests of high-octane developers connected to the political class.

Trust?

It doesn't exist, and it is precisely that environment that fuels anarchists who back Donald Trump, whose own arrest becomes – with some resonance – an opportunity to condemn the politics of law enforcement, for isn't all of it – or most of it – infected? Horrified, New Jersey Democrats resist his comeback, but they created the gambling Mecca Mussolini, after all.



From InsiderNJ's Bob Hennelly:

“Was our current national misery all presaged by Trump's spectacular collapse in Atlantic City, which is so evident years later in the hulking ruin that is the vacant Trump Plaza at the heart of the iconic boardwalk? If Donald Trump tries to subvert democracy, will New Jersey—the one that Lincoln Steffens described as “the traitor state” for its embrace of corporate trusts—be implicated for the way the state's media and political elites indulged him?

“As Trump's gambling empire grew, which was built on massive debt and on what the New York Times subsequently reported (September 27, 2020) as breathtaking tax avoidance, New Jersey's elected politicians and gaming regulators saw his continued success as central to the state's economic development.

“As former *New York Times* reporter, Timothy O'Brien, wrote in his 2005 book, “*TrumpNation, The Art of Being the Donald*,” while Trump “wasn't passionate about Atlantic City, the town was certainly passionate about him. Over the years, New Jersey regulators and law enforcement officials had gone out of their way to accommodate the developer, and he used that welcome mat to forge a hammerlock on Atlantic City gambling.”

“Though no one was supposed to own more than three of Atlantic City's twelve casinos, Donald at one point was permitted to have four (and he purchased a fifth that had closed, so he could have extra hotel rooms on the city's cramped boardwalk),” writes O'Brien. “Though regulators were supposed to strictly monitor the financial well-being of casinos and their owners, Donald was consistently given extra latitude to work through mounting money woes that left him teetering on the brink of personal bankruptcy.”

Now outraged, the New Jersey Democratic Party can't face the reality that facilitated Trump, this picture of narcissistic unbalance wearing a guilty verdict in a sex abuse trial as a – what – *example for our kids*? They are, of course, the same party that – in perhaps an even more obvious example of salesmanship as a substitute for citizenship - opened its embrace to not one but two Goldman Sachs alumni as its last two establishment-backed candidates for governor: Jon Corzine in 2005 and 2009 and Phil Murphy in 2017 and 2021.

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And we – who occupy that forgiving, decidedly unscientific clime called politics – wonder about the mental unrest of our children.

Perhaps resigned to the beast, Christie pulled off the ultimate duplicity.

Here at home, he cultivated a political alliance with George Norcross III and Steve Sweeney, as that most organized expression – through the leadership of the Building Trades – of the New Jersey Democratic Party.

Out of state, Christie savaged Democrats.

I remember asking a Republican what Christie would do next.

“Whatever Norcross...”

It wasn't exactly, “Whatever Norcross tells him to do.”

It was more along the lines of “Whatever Norcross wants; because that is what is politically expedient here in New Jersey.” And what was politically expedient in a national Republican Primary was to act like Democrats are the antichrist.

Ironically (or NOT!), Christie, the first elected official of consequence to back Trump's presidential bid in 2016, rose to power on the strength of his politicization of law enforcement – weaponizing the U.S. Attorney's Office for headlines – which Trump, ever mindful of the trust gap, drums as the calculation behind charges brought by DA Melvin Bragg, and the ever-ambitious Christie defends “the law,” while positioning himself for his own presidential run.

A world without Trump-Christie-Norcross in office or controlling office, looks little better.

Mostly the same, in fact. A federal friend of mine, a lifelong bureaucrat, asked to identify the chief trouble inside the beltway, said our institutions continue to rapidly decay from within, the consequence of too many political appointments. “Biden,” he said, “is an old school Democrat pol who just pays loyalty with jobs.” The unraveling endures. Put that together with former U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff – even amid the aftermath of 9-11 and years before Jan. 6th, 2021 – making the case that domestic strife remains our greatest security threat.

If we lack trust at the core of our society, what can we reliably leave our children except a heightened sense of distrust?

If we posit unraveled megalomania as a virtue, anarchy as an improvement on order and insults as rhetoric, how can we point a finger at our social media-saturated children sunk into themselves?

In such an atmosphere, can parents truly believe – even the best of them, who inculcate deep spiritual and moral values – in the reinforcing principles of the courts, the capitol buildings, the schools; or did the worst of our institutions already contribute to our own disintegration?





# Finding Our Way



However imperfectly, the state legislature wanted to respond. Even if we had all allowed the engines to suffocate so much of the human spirit and now only too late pivoted, some fiber of decency and compassion for young people came through in the words and work of veteran lawmakers from both parties. Yes, to a certain degree, we all walled in sin (“If we could communicate with a mosquito,” wrote Nietzsche, “we would learn that it, too, flies through the air with the same pathos, feeling it to be the moving center of the entire world.”) but teetering at the edge of anarchy gave everyone a chance to make something of a moment on behalf of afflicted youth.

In the aftermath of Adriana Kuch’s suicide, state Senator Vin Gopal (D-11), chair of the Senate Education Committee, convened hearings with experts to try to figure out how to be more responsive to students under siege.

It’s one thing to look at the chaos we’ve made and say, “Why wouldn’t our children be in dire straits?” But again, we’re steps away from men in minotaur headdresses stampeding our (yes, yes, excruciatingly imperfect) halls of government.

Why not try *something*?

Senator Turner noted the Tyler Clementi Higher Education Anti-Harassment Act, a federal law that emerged from New Jersey, widely regarded as a foundational legal instrument “to make America’s colleges and universities safer and more affirming for LGBTQ+ students by requiring the establishment of policies that prohibit harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity,” according to JoDee Winterhof, of Human Rights Campaign.



The senator supported the law and other strengthening measures to protect students in New Jersey's schools, including 2011's Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights, which aimed to provide school administrators with tools to respond to instances of harassment, intimidation and bullying in a timely and effective manner.

But as Turner sees it, the law as it exists too finely applies to a protected class of individuals, those who might be targeted because of their sexual orientation, the color of their skin, or their ethnic or national identity.

"We need the law to protect all students," Turner told InsiderNJ. "It needs to be more universal."



Breana Renda of Toms River added her voice to the cause of the heartbroken Michael Kuch, father of Adriana, to ensure that New Jersey will respond to a crisis it did heed in time to save a precious life. "Social media played a very big role in Adriana taking her life," Renda told InsiderNJ. "...We need to put an end to this kind of malicious and intimidating posting; make it against the law. In this case, I have a child due to go to Central Regional High School, and I don't feel 100% safe. There is a big negligence problem."

*In 2021, bipartisan legislation sponsored by Sen. Joe Pennacchio (R-26) and Sen. Patrick Diegnan (D-18) strengthened New Jersey's anti-bullying laws and improved protections for students has received final legislative approval. S-1790 amended New Jersey's Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights with specific requirements on school districts to help prevent and respond to bullying incidents.*

"The Legislature has aggressively moved to control bullying in our schools, but it hasn't been enough," Pennacchio said at the time. "Today, victims of bullying are prone to attack 24 hours a day by schoolmates or rivals texting from their phones or flexing social media muscles online.

"This bill requires school and county officials to address bullying before it gets out of control, and makes it clear that districts, school officials and parents have a defined responsibility to protect children from aggressions that can occur on and off school property, on the internet, or by text," added Pennacchio (pictured).



Pennacchio's and Diegnan's legislation became known as "Mallory's Law" in honor of Mallory Rose Grossman, a relentlessly bullied 12-year-old Rockaway student – and a Pennacchio constituent - who committed suicide more than five years ago.

Before Adriana, there was Mallory.



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Before Adriana's Law, there was Mallory's Law.

How many more children?

How many more laws?

We need laws to protect children, but if we lose trust in our process, we lose trust in our institutions, and make them the enemy, not the handmaiden of families. We begin to restore trust by engaging the process through human interaction with lawmakers willing to make that engagement.



“This legislation seeks to address the unimaginable circumstances which led to the death of Mallory Rose Grossman, who took her own life after suffering bullying at school and on social media,” said Diegnan (pictured). “Cyber harassment has become another weapon used by bullies to destroy those innocent victims who they relentlessly target. A parent or guardian who willfully disre-

gards or enables the cyber-attacks of a minor adjudicated of cyber-harassment must be held accountable. I am heartened by the support of The NJ State PBA, Garden State Coalition of Schools, NJ Association of School Administrators, and NJ School Boards Association.”

Pennacchio labors on.

“My job as an elected official – in addition to being honest and responsive – has to be empathetic,” the veteran senator told InsiderNJ. “It must include taking on the struggles of real people – and their children.”

The senator described the senate education hearings as a “step in the right direction.”

“Everybody should park their partisanship at the door and recognize that our kids have become desensitized to death,” Pennacchio said. “We should be monitoring what our kids are looking at.”

At the federal level, lawmakers in both parties have put the App “TikTok” squarely at the center of a debate concerning children’s mental health. In New Jersey, Adriana Kuch’s death - and the implications for other at-risk youth - makes the pursuit more urgent, even if one New Jersey lawmaker makes national security the priority.

Consider this, via The New York Post:

Following their self-filmed beating of Adriana Kuch, “The [perpetrators] used the video to continue to harass and intimidate her and make fun of her,” Michael Kuch told The Post of his daughter, Adriana Kuch.

“Hours before Adriana’s death, one of the girls who recorded the assault in the hallway at Central Regional High School in Berkeley Township sent

Adriana a text mocking her for being covered in ‘dripping blood’ and getting her ‘a- whooped.’

“The tormented teen was driven to suicide because she was embarrassed footage of the beat-down spread rapidly on TikTok and Snapchat, Kuch told The Daily Mail.”



While recognizing the deleterious impact on adolescents and children, U.S. Rep. Josh Gottheimer (D-5) of Bergen County wants to ban TikTok as a matter of American national security.

This from the congressman’s office: “Studies show that TikTok’s addictive qualities may have a negative impact on children’s mental health. The algorithm is designed to keep users engaged longer, and studies show the more kids and teens spend on social media, the more likely they will be depressed.”

A Fifth District 13-year-old girl had her TikTok account hacked, and changed from private to public — exposing her identity, pictures, and videos. The hacker changed her password and locked her out of the account.

The congressman wants legislation that would grant the President the power to ban TikTok in

the United States, or force the sale of its U.S. operations to an American company — if the President believes there is continued data collection and a clear threat to our national security.

Gottheimer wrote to TikTok, demanding that they immediately cease all data collection of personally identifiable information on American citizens, beginning with our children.

“It’s time we gave the President the tools to fight back against TikTok’s information invasion against America’s families. In the wrong hands, this data is an enormous asset to the Chinese Communist Party — a known adversary — and their malign activities. In fact, Chinese law obligates TikTok’s parent company to, and I quote, ‘support, assist, and cooperate with state intelligence work.’ So TikTok is basically bought and paid for by the Chinese government. Today, I’m taking two concrete steps to battle TikTok’s assault on our children’s privacy. Last July, I wrote a letter to the CEO of TikTok questioning their child data privacy policies. Their response was stunning, inadequate, unproductive, and frankly insulting, to say the least. They made no commitment to protect both our country and our children. They admitted that they collect data on children, including IP addresses and other device information.”

Montana banned TikTok, even as a national debate rages among Republicans.

Missouri Senator Josh Hawley (R) wants legislation that would ban TikTok from operating in the United States but finds himself blockaded by his own party. Calling TikTok “digital fentanyl” and arguing it could give the Chinese government access to data from 150 million American users, Hawley seeks passage of a bill that would block and prohibit U.S. transactions with TikTok’s par-

ent company, Beijing-based ByteDance Ltd., within 30 days.

The bill “sends the message to Communist China that you cannot buy us,” Hawley said.

Republican Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky objected to Hawley’s motion, arguing that trying to ban an app would violate the Constitution and anger the millions of voters who use it. “Speech is protected whether you like it or not,” Paul said.

In New Jersey, Pennacchio follows the debate.

“What Rand Paul said is ok but there should be a different standard for children, and it is up to their parents to do it for them,” said the Morris County-based senator. “We used to sit in front of the TV when we were kids, and now our kids play with their phones. They may be harming themselves, and there is no greater work than assuring the mental health of young people.”

Gopal, chair of the Senate Education Committee, added:

“The biggest problem still remains getting the Department of Education [DOE] to do a true mental health assessment in all 600 of school districts of what they are spending and what they are doing [counselors, third parties etc.]. I am looking at doing legislation to get districts to fill it out by the end of the year or they will be penalized if they don't. It may be only way to get them to do it.

“Once we have that, we can put together a funding proposal of what the gaps are in the 600 school districts and help those with additional funding for counselors and therapists. For example, Red Bank Regional... two full time counselors and they see every student, have a tutoring

program, a food pantry on site etc. An incredible program - however, Asbury Park has nothing but they get mental health dollars - but it's not clear what they do with it.”

Focused on the positive – as much as humanly possible – hardnosed military man, Michael Kuch, father of the young lady who died after four girls ganged up on her and beat her, last month raised just over \$5,000 for the Society for Prevention of Teen Society at the Legion in Little Egg Harbor.





# Losing Sight of What We Have



Military service may simply amount to damage done to the next generation. The heaped atrocities on one generation either self-combust or find a victim in that innocent next generation: an unwitting son seeking a father, or an unwitting daughter. Every supposedly heroic deed undertaken in the desert or jungle unravels with the pent-up rage of the unspoken horror unleashed.

But we lost a sacrifice-minded individual this year when state Senator Ronald L. Rice (D-28) (pictured) died.

They ridiculed the Vietnam combat veteran in his own party, even tried to bully him in his old age, though he never seemed old, only edgy with the most vivid visions of his country.

Something noble endures, even in the left-behind

hallways of institutions that at their worst seem even to repudiate the sacrifices of the best among us.

We must be sufficiently humble to understand what we can control, and what we can't.

Remember the innocent and the dead.

When we walked into the classroom on that first week of September, we noticed the single ditto sheets on the tops of each of our desks as Fili, senior English teacher, told us to sit down and read the words we saw printed. Each of us had the same page and the same words, and each of us recognized them immediately. They were the lyrics to the song "Born in the USA," by Bruce Springsteen.

“Take your time,” urged Fili, noting how our familiarity with the work caused most of us to disengage. We had, after all, memorized those lyrics, then just two years old, and I can summon the opening lines even now: “Born down in a dead man’s town; the first kick I took was when I hit the ground. You end up like a dog that’s been beat too much till you spend half your life just covering up. Born in the USA.”

We half recited, half read the sparse lines over to ourselves, and when they sparked other conversations, perhaps about earlier albums, and how this one lacked the raw power of *The River*, or *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, Fili rose from his desk and asked a question of the class:

“What is this song about?”

The question produced exactly the response I know Fili sought, but I didn’t know it then, as we arrogantly acted like an academic from New York couldn’t possibly know something we didn’t about our sacred street and shore turf.

No one raised a hand.



Fili waited.

In the ensuing silence, he walked from one end of the room to the other, like an actor preparing to deliver the monologue from *Hamlet*, as the pages sat in front of us, fully realized, or so we believed, to the point of seeing a kind of sacrilege in sharing it with – of all things – *a teacher*.

At last, Fili took the initiative, summoned one of us out of his chair, and asked the student to explain, to the rest of us, what Bruce Springsteen meant in the song “Born in the USA.”

“It’s about his love of America,” said the kid. “Bruce loves the USA. Like me.”

Maybe he mumbled something more at the teacher’s request but did not see fit to entangle himself any deeper in lines he innately – just like all of us – understood.

Fili kindly asked him to take his seat and gave another student a chance.

The kid said, “I agree. Bruce loves America, just like me.”

“Thank you,” Fili said. The student could sit down.

The teacher then gave a dramatic pause, still pacing, head bowed thoughtfully, hand stroking his chin. He asked, “Does anyone else have another opinion? Can anyone say what ‘Born in the USA’ is about?”

Silence in the room.

We were satisfied. Called on without warning after a summer of hedonism and indolent revelry, those two brave students had acquitted them-

selves well with answers adequate to the task, which gave voice to what any one of us would say about that patriotic anthem by beloved local boy made good Bruce.

But Fili suddenly looked unfulfilled, irritated, even angry and enormously offended.

“Wrong,” he spat. “And what I want to know is how I can expect to take you – with any kind of confidence – to ancient Athens and the works of Sophocles and Aeschylus, or to the Elizabethan era and the Globe Theater, to plume the depths of tragedy, *when you don’t even know your own myths.*”

When he uttered those last words, at the front of the room at last and stationary, he leaned over and spoke in a haunted, desperate whisper. “Myths are all we have,” he added.

Myths. Yes, Jersey style.

If you’re like me, maybe you had that guy, Fili at the head of the class, a teacher or a mentor; that person who in another life might just as easily have been a sarge in the Union army who saves the company from getting trapped behind enemy lines, or the mess hall bulldog who keeps the chow line moving and the troops fed on the frontlines and is the first man in a Jeep driving across no man’s land.

That was the other guy I grew up with, the indomitable coach who would put his finger in your chest and drive you back against a wall if you offered anything less than total commitment. If you showed cowardice or attachment to your own comfort or self-interest over the welfare of the team or lack of understanding of accountability, if you paid attention to the little whining, self-pitying voice within, you would suddenly find

him bellowing in your face. If you failed to grasp the concept of character as the foundation of sport, you might wake up one day and be without a team. This was that guy with the yellow loose-leaf paper, writing down times and rearranging lineups for races, teaching history classes, drawing the x’s and o’s of Sherman taking Kennesaw by day, then drilling you after school, then jumping up to the wheel of the bus and barreling north on the Parkway to the Turnpike and over the bridge into Manhattan or to the Bronx for those meets like it was the siege of Atlanta.



In all weather, he juggled that most elusive quality at the core of every great high school coach: an uncompromising dedication to winning – and a deep, unerring dedication to the young athletes he served. His exacting ability to strike that balance forms the very alchemy of integrity that inspires kids to become teammates and teammates to win championships.

In all these years since, I have wondered on occasion where men like Bill Bruno have gone in our selfish and self-serving and in many ways timid and cowardly age, but on those better days I suspect a few of them are still out there. Still, amid

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the sense of a massive cultural and societal cave-in, a few moments stand out for me, and they stand in relief to our ongoing fascination with personality and theatricality as a substitute for character.

This was a guy, Bruno, who never stopped working, who built a team the way some other man might construct a fortress on wheels.

I remember him organizing a tournament in which the senior captains took on the roles of team leaders. He came up with the names, which he shared with the lads: Carroll's Cruisers. Ruane's Rangers. Gilson's Greyhounds. I was on Ruane's Rangers, which would have been my preference, for Ruane was our high hurdling hero, who called me his protege, which made Bruno scoff. He didn't like monikers that rewarded people before they put numbers on the board.

"Rangers!" Ruane bellowed, and we all gathered around him, and despite his big brotherly vote of confidence, Ruane had learned from Bruno and was likewise unsparing and unforgiving and solely focused on getting our times down. Along with Bruno, he worked us into the ground – this was freshman year – and we thought we were no good, because Bruno said so – he told us all the time how "horrendous" we were – how he reveled in that word – and enforced – with the repetition of drills total discipline: 200s and 400s in the round barn, then hurdle exercises in the sprint barn. He was not pleased with our progress, and when we participated in our first meet at West Point, we were stunned when we almost effortlessly annihilated the rest of the freshman competition.

What?

We thought we were "horrendous." I still remem-

ber looking at that Gold Medal in awe up there on the Hudson River. "It's the worst one you'll win," and Matt Rusher, an older kid, referring to the less than precise lines in the figure of a runner on the rectangular medallion, and the lack of accompanying detail.

Bruno was driving the bus back to Jersey.

How had we won?

It was still a mystery.

Then there was that other time when some members of the team whined at a meet because two guys from another school won every event and at one point coach ordered the entire team onto the bus and slammed the door so it was just us and him. He mocked us privileged Catholic school boys for having the audacity to complain. We were getting three square meals a day. We had every advantage. How dare we make excuses.

There was another time, too, in the sprint barn when we weren't practicing very hard and Bruno got frustrated and called us to order. It was that moment when he pointed to the chalk drawing of a heart with his and a girl's initials in it on the wall in the barn where we trained, telling us, "I ran on this same track. I was a student-athlete at this school, like you. This is tradition. This is your school, and my school. You're not just part of one another when you put on that blue uniform, you're part of everyone who went here, who was part of this. Don't ever disgrace your school by failing to give it less than your best."

That was Bruno.

And it was Bruno when some kids from Staten Island showed up bragging about how they were going to school us, and us country boys all stood



around not saying anything and Billy B. walked over and told them, with an attitude, “You’re not in Staten Island anymore,” before we ran the poor guys into the ground. There was that moment at Manhattan College where I had already run my event and went back to the track and he grabbed me and said he needed me for a relay team and I told him I’d love to help but I just ate and there was that finger again, driving me back and the voice, intolerant of anyone who would consider not making a sacrifice for the team, and I was out there running and we won. It was Bruno at the armory where the homeless men slept in beds on the interior of the track where we ran on wooden boards and anyone who said anything about those old guys needed to think twice about what it must have felt like not to have a home and to be out on the streets.



I do not revisit this story as a piece of nostalgia or to merely pay homage to a beloved coach, but to lean again on a man – gone now – to make the case amid shrieks of anarchy and the shaking post-COVID foundations as the profession struggles to place spear carriers in position – to pay

these professionals more, as much as possible, to support parents who require allies in our institutions, but most importantly, to support children – even as we demand accountability at the highest level. In the words of Jason O’Donnell, never do we feel as vulnerable as when we drop our children off at school...

Children shoulder the worst of our national teacher shortage, as the adults play politics and consult the weathervanes of madmen. One in four teachers has left the profession, staggering in search of something better, heads ringing with the 24-7 atmospherics of a profession in crisis since the era of COVID-19. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are at least 280,000 fewer public school teachers nationwide than before the pandemic. “It’s all hands on-deck right now,” New Jersey Education Association (NJEA) President Sean Spiller told InsiderNJ at the beginning of the school year. “The pandemic didn’t cause this problem but put a bigger light on it. We’ve got to do more.”

“People had the attitude that they [teachers] only teach 180 days out of the year, but they have to eat 365 days out of the year,” said Senator Turner. “They’re not being paid as professionals. So much has happened in terms of devaluing teachers. Their morale has been impacted. At one time we valued teachers. During the pandemic, when parents saw their kids at home, they got a better appreciation for teachers. Lifting residency requirements is not going to solve the problem.”

We have to pay teachers more, said Turner. The average teacher’s salary in New Jersey stands at \$46K, with a range between \$38K to \$57K. “We’re going to have to increase that,” she said. We must remove barriers preventing students in college from undertaking careers in education,” the senator added.

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Find a way to fund them; keep them on the jobs. Train and retrain them. Reinforce them to reinforce families and to reinforce children.

It's not just the firefighters running into burning buildings, as O'Donnell said.

It's the teachers and the coaches.

It's the backbone of a society deranged enough to make enemies of those we need as parents to reinforce the message of consequences, to echo Grossman.

Critically, find a way to make schools on a human scale that support the work of coaches and teachers, so they can support the children, and give parents the assurance that our schools are not centers for beat-downs and prisons where children serve only as the collateral of rampant development, but, in fact, gardens where children learn and grow.

I still remember going up to my daughter's kindergarten teacher and trying to make conversation. With two bulging eyes of compassion fatigue, she looked through me. She had no time, no interest. I encountered the same eyes, the same frenzy of disconnection and disassociation, over the entirety of my daughter's public school career.



Blue Ribbon School professionals?

That was a gimmick, built on a handful of school district performers, and un-accessed by the rest. I don't blame them.

Having blown up the past, the no-man's land we made in service to development as a virtue unto itself must now attempt to dig out of the deep-impact consequence of its total takeover, by either grudgingly accepting the old stone corridors, or bulldozing out of the remains of its own ruins and egomaniacal aesthetic and moral transgressions.

In the words of the Christian Bale character in *American Hustle*, "Roselyn... Roselyn was interesting." And so, in its own way, is the town of little sense we hand our children. Even if its core feels more like a Jackson Pollock painting than a community-minded zocalo, those splashes of incongruity and disjointedness, wastrel concrete and architectural weirdness add up to a character in a movie who falls off her chair at dinner and gets unwittingly trapped in a corruption plot, which she survives. The town in this case does have its own history. It is, after all, home to the Route 22 diner and motel where a woman once lured a prominent developer's brother-in-law in an infamous case of blackmail. But more to the point, for a social media-engineered age acclimated to a lifestyle wherein people seek new ways to close one another out and off rather than coming together around shared traditions and actual experiences, the town we conceived out of our mental duress would appear to have a huge, bland leg up on the future.

We live huddled in anterograde amnesia.

Mickey Rourke in Michael Cimino's *Year of the Dragon* has a scene where he goes berserk in a po-

lice commissioner's office. A white-haired Rourke – really one of the greatest American actors – plays a cop in Chinatown who spends more time fighting the corruption of the police department than the Chinese mafia.

His underlying, unrelenting gripe?

“It’s always f\*cking politics!”

Yes, Mickey. Or Stanley – that was his character’s name, an obvious nod to Brando’s *Streetcar Named Desire* meltdown (Culturally we went from Blanche DuBois to *politics* as the source of male anguish, in just three decades). “It’s always f\*cking politics.” But so, too, have we acquiesced to the gun as a substitute for that refinement of language prized by Jefferson.

The beating of Adriana Kuch goes on and on.



We made a thing we call a school and allow children to enter and beat one another and escape without accountability, while fearing gunmen crawling over a mindlessly wrought monolith that once contained a landscape.

We don't know precisely where we're going. We

never did.

But this is for fathers. Fathers of daughters. You alone know the preciousness of the girls who will soon be women, God willing. Guard them with all your being. Nurture as only a mature man can. Rise defiantly to meet the eye of a world that says otherwise. Prize the glory of civilization that alone resides in the creation and unimpeded flowering of a young woman.

A family member lay dying this month. She fulfilled every possible expectation of the best of her breed. She went and fought for her PhD while others in her midst writhed in the past. I look at the world we occupy and see a mishmash of our Gen X dreams, wriggling incomprehensibly.

Two art books sat on my knees last weekend, and my daughter – barely interested – considered their contents.

El Greco and Picasso.

The former sees the human condition as a hinge to heaven, while the latter interprets a Freudian underworld amok. The beehive Daliah Lavi nymphs of nascent manhood flew like pastel Picasso hummingbirds out of his strange-shaped imaginings.

But the woman stayed focused.

She never kowtowed to any vision but the one she made, the one America told her to follow. She saw the world of heaven hovering at the edge of our concrete underworld.

Now, she goes.

My daughter will try to make sense of what remains.

“This is the sweatshirt that Adriana Kuch gave me,” said Halie Engesser.

My daughter stared into her eyes.

We had Star Trek, Batman and the Monkees. My daughter possesses TikTok videos of school associates beating the living hell out of one another while someone else films and posts and voices cackle from unfound corners like compounded invasive species.

No girl, I tell her telepathically, revving the motorcycle engine over the next ornery New Jersey outpost of agony.

We control the machine, not the other way around.

I think about my cousin, dying.

We couldn't have been more than two and four, and we stood in a Greyhound Bus Depot in Denver, Colorado, holding hands, and she taught me a song she knew: “Raindrops keep falling on my head,” from Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, and it seemed so appropriate then and innocent at the start of our lives, as we break the tape, and our children wonder whether they can dodge the next hail of gunfire at school or the torrent of blows thrown with savage intent between classes from fellow students they thought might have been friends.

The Monkees never died. They merely perpetually beckon you – like a siren song of innocence – to a virtual fold of the universe where you die, and leave your kid alone to fight the filming, merciless, mouth-foaming, incomprehensible present. Stand up, stand up, stand up beside the girl in the public hallway under attack.

Remember Mallory Grossman.

Find the way to honor her.

Build trust.

Look into the eyes of the people we put there to find a way, even when none seems possible at this late date.

Don't turn from the institutions.

Engage them.

Change them.

Hold them accountable, as we do our children. Remember Adriana Kuch.

Honor her.

Honor them. Always.

Look in the eyes of the living child.

Ride this old horse country still somehow called New Jersey, knowing the consequences of losing alertness, of ceding any mental ground to distracting intrusions, never losing hold of our greatest imaginings.

