



Parent's Worst Nightmare

Two years ago, best friends Rachel Crites and Rachel Smith took their own lives sitting in a car on a remote road in rural Virginia. Now, for the first time, the girls' parents talk about what happened—and the warning signs they missed

By Kathleen Wheaton

It was just a wrong turn—taking a left instead of a right onto Route-175 outside Baltimore—but to Rachel Crites and Rachel Smith, going the wrong way and getting a ticket must have felt like the end of the world. It was Thursday, Jan. 18, 2007, the last day of semester exams at Thomas S. Wootton High School in Rockville. Rachel Smith, a junior, had taken an exam that morning—an exam she'd get an "A" on, leading to a report card of straight A's. There was to be no school on Friday, and the girls, both animal lovers, had decided to go horseback riding at a stable in Millersville, Md., despite the overcast and chilly weather.

The two Rachels had become inseparable best friends over the past year and a half. Rachel Smith, 16, was small with light-brown hair, green eyes and a pretty, heart-shaped face. Known to her friends as "Pi," after the mathematical term, the North Potomac teenager was an excellent student, and had decided on a career as a veterinarian. She had an after-school job at Potomac Kennels in Gaithersburg and recently had been awarded a coveted internship at a veterinary hospital.

Eighteen-year-old Rachel Crites, slender, dark-eyed and vivacious, was a 2006 graduate of Wootton, where she'd been on the track team and performed in the spring musical *Seussical*. The Gaithersburg teen hadn't felt ready to leave home for college, according to her father, Troy Crites, so she registered at Montgomery College with the idea of studying nursing. Perhaps due to Pi's influence, she was also considering vet school.

The two girls were driving to the Millersville stable in Rachel Crites' dark blue, 1997 Subaru Outback station wagon, a hand-me-down from her father. But Pi, who had neither a driver's license nor a learner's permit, was the one behind the wheel when the two mistakenly turned onto the National Security Agency campus in Fort Meade. Pi turned the car around before they reached the guard booth—apparently a suspicious-enough maneuver for a patrol car to pull them over.

It had occurred to Pi's mother, Marian Smith, that Rachel Crites might be tempted to let her daughter practice driving when the girls went out together, and she had explicitly asked them not to do this. "But unbeknownst to us," Marian says, "Rachel was letting my Rachel drive."

The two Rachels were "like two peas in a pod—where you saw one, you saw the other," Troy says. He thought Pi's sharp wit complemented his daughter's gentler high spirits. Rachel Crites suffered from depression and had attempted suicide by stabbing herself with scissors in March of her senior year. With therapy, medication and Pi's friendship, however, she seemed to have stabilized. Rachel's therapist told Troy that the closeness between the girls was largely positive, although she worried about what might happen if they had a falling out.

From the girls' perspectives, based on individual and joint diaries, their deep bond was to last forever, although they already had learned what it was like to be separated. In the fall of 2006, Rachel Crites had used some of her graduation money to buy a \$600 American Eskimo dog for Pi. Although the Smiths had a dog, Pi had been campaigning for one of her own. She also struggled emotionally. Several months earlier, her parents had discovered that she was cutting herself, but she refused to talk to any of the therapists she had been taken to see. Pi told her parents that one therapist agreed with her about the dog, and Marian and her husband, Paul Smith, joined their daughter in a meeting with the therapist to discuss the idea. "We were open to the idea that getting a dog might encourage Rachel to open up," Marian says. Pi then told them about Buddy, the already-purchased puppy, which was being kept at the Crites' house. "At that point, all bets were off," Marian says. "I didn't want to be manipulated like that."

Pi was told that the dog had to go back. Troy says he didn't blame the Smiths for not wanting to take on the dog. His second marriage was falling apart, and he already had two Labrador

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retrievers, so he didn't want the puppy, either.

In addition to having to send Buddy back to the kennel, the girls were forbidden to see each other for a week. "Which was horrible," Troy says. "So, what they presumed would happen [as punishment] when the police stopped them was at least that, or more, because Rachel had let Pi drive." The officer wrote Pi a ticket for a mandatory court appearance that carried a \$320 fine. Rachel received a 3-point ticket and a \$165 fine. "They decided they would rather be dead than separated," Troy says. "And 24 hours later, they were."

If the decision to commit suicide was impulsive, it was carried out with an attention to detail that suggested both girls had been contemplating death to a far greater extent than their devastated parents had realized. Over the next 24 hours, the two girls tried unsuccessfully to buy ammunition for two of Troy's guns, went out for an expensive final meal, purchased a Shop-Vac hose and drove to a remote and wooded area of Loudoun County, Va. There, they ran the hose from the tailpipe into the car with the doors and windows locked and the motor running. The girls died of carbon monoxide poisoning, most likely during the afternoon of Jan. 19, 2007, several hours before anyone realized they were missing.

The night before, after the girls failed to return at Pi's curfew hour of 11 p.m., the Smiths called Troy, who found a chilling note on his daughter's desk. In it, she apologized to her loved ones and asked to be buried next to Pi. The families' friends and neighbors, as well as strangers across the country who had heard about the missing girls, joined in a nationwide search for the two Rachels. The girls were found dead in the car two weeks later.

Rachel and Pi's parents knew of the teens' emotional troubles and had taken steps to help them. In both cases, the girls had appeared to be doing better and had made plans for the future. Troy, an aerospace engineer in the defense industry, has combed through diaries Rachel left behind, as well as her e-mail and MySpace page, reconstructing events and, with a scientist's precision, looking for the missed clues to his daughter's despair. The information is all there, he says, but he couldn't see it. "As a parent, your whole project is to give this person life, to get them going in life," says Troy, who has been appearing at public forums to talk about teens and suicide. "The idea that they don't want what you desperately want for them is impossible to believe."

Marian says she now realizes "our daughter was screaming out for help—just not to us." For the Smiths, the struggle to come to terms with Pi's death has been private until now. They have agreed to tell their story, in hopes that others might benefit from what they have experienced.

Still going to high school

Marian and Paul Smith liked Rachel Crites, although the two-year age difference between the girls struck them as unusual. "Eighteen-year-olds normally want to hang out with other 18-year olds," Marian says. "But I wanted [our] Rachel to be open with us, so we made a conscious decision not to be negative about the friendship. But we put some constraints on it." On school nights, the girls were permitted to see each other for an hour or so; on weekends, they could do as they pleased, as long as Pi adhered to her curfew. The girls, however, were together far more than Marian knew. "We were not aware," she says, "that Rachel Crites was still going to school at Wootton after she'd graduated."

Rachel was an early riser, Troy says, and offered to drive Pi to school before continuing on to her own classes at Montgomery College's Rockville campus. But on the mornings she didn't have school, he says, she often stuck around at Wootton with Pi. When he asked her why she was attending high school classes, he says she told him, "They are interesting, I'm learning stuff, and they don't mind." Troy adds, "I know of a teacher who came to Rachel's funeral who could attest to that." According to Marian, Wootton principal Michael Doran told her after her daughter's death that some of the girls' teachers were unaware of the school's strict no-visitor policy. Regarding this and other complaints the Smiths have made about Wootton's handling of their daughter's troubles, Doran says, "I don't think it's my role to be defensive when they lost their child."

Perhaps because Pi spent a great deal of time at the Crites' house, Troy was less concerned about the friendship than the Smiths. Rachel had always acted young for her age, and as a child tended to play with younger kids, he says—a follower rather than a leader. As a freshman at West Potomac High School in Alexandria, Va., she had fallen in with a crowd that didn't care about school, so when Rachel's stepmother, Regina, also an engineer, got a job in Montgomery County, she and Troy saw a move to the Wootton school district as an opportunity for Rachel to make a fresh start as a sophomore. "At Wootton," Troy says, "Rachel just blossomed."

Rachel Crites' mother, Kathryn Cornelius, who lives in Italy, says her daughter was a happy but sensitive child who loved animals and did not make friends easily, although she became almost obsessively attached once she did. Rachel's childhood was spent both in Alexandria and outside Milan, Italy, where Kathryn had moved in 1992 after separating from Troy.

Kathryn, who is a management consultant, attended Wellesley College in Wellesley, Mass., and met Troy, who attended Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Mass., while both were students. They were an active and energetic young couple, she says, but difficulties

communicating left her increasingly unhappy during their 10 years of marriage. Kathryn writes in an e-mail that she met Norberto Bastia and became pregnant while on a business trip to Italy. She says that because she chose not to end the pregnancy—Troy's condition for the marriage to continue—they got divorced. Says Troy: "Call me narrow-minded, old-fashioned, or just normal, but I was not interested in raising the child of her lover, especially given she was not willing, or able, to stop seeing him." Kathryn says she felt she had no choice but to join Norberto overseas. "My decision to move to Italy was seen as a caprice by Troy, and is portrayed as my abandonment of the family and my children... I don't believe Troy worried about protecting them from this idea."

Kathryn says she persuaded Troy to let Rachel and Rachel's older brother, Trevor, join her in Italy the following year. They stayed for three years, but Rachel had difficulty learning the language. After many discussions with Troy about which country was a better setting for both children's upbringing, Kathryn says she agreed to send them back to their father. "I regret to this day that I let them return," she writes. "It was a critical time in Rachel's and Trevor's lives and it was not managed in their best interests. I consider myself and Troy both responsible for this." Rachel was academically behind when she began third grade in Alexandria, Troy says, and she pined for her mother. She quickly bonded, however, with Regina Dugan, whom Troy married when Rachel was 10. In her diaries, Rachel refers to her stepmother as "B-Mom," or "Bonus Mom."

Rachel and Trevor, who was two years older, had lengthy phone conversations with Kathryn every Sunday and spent their school vacations and summers in Italy. If the setup wasn't ideal, Troy says, "it wasn't a bad life." He accompanied the children on Christmas ski vacations in the Alps, and in the summer the children would join their mother at a beach or mountain spot in Italy, their days unstructured and without TV, the evenings devoted to talk, dinner and games. "Kids are pretty adaptable to whatever life is," Troy says.

Trevor apparently was more adaptable than Rachel. He became fluent in Italian and had a less complicated relationship with Kathryn. But Rachel wanted only for her mother to return to the U.S. "She was too young at first, and too unhappy later, to understand how unrealistic it would be for me to move back," Kathryn writes. "My husband could not have worked in the U.S., which would have created difficulties in this marriage....I tried desperately to have Rachel move back to Italy with me...but she could not conceive of leaving her friends."

Rachel began cutting herself and hiding the scars under her watchband when she was 16. Troy says it was a few months before a Christmas visit to Italy in 2004 that Rachel did the math and realized that her mother had become pregnant with half-brother Gianluca while still married to her father. In February of 2005, Rachel finally confessed to her father and stepmother about the cutting, and later wrote in an e-mail to Kathryn: "what i was doing was scaring me, i had to tell someone so that it wouldnt get worse...I already had scars when i got there for christmas. you didnt notice but i was really uncomfortable on new years because i had to take off my watch...The first time i broke skin was when i found out about how you and dad broke up."

Joan Goodman, a Rockville psychotherapist who has appeared with Troy at meetings of mental health professionals to discuss the warning signs of teen depression and suicide, says cutting "is a way of turning one's emotional pain into physical pain, which is easier to handle because it puts the person in control of their pain." A specialist in adolescents, Goodman has treated more than 300 teenage cutters since the behavior became epidemic in the late 1990s. "Oftentimes, cutting is the opposite of suicide, because it acts as a dysfunctional coping mechanism that allows the person to stay alive by releasing endorphins that make them feel better," Goodman says. On the other hand, she adds, "one can never assume it's not about suicide, since this is a population that flirts with the idea of death. Happy kids don't cut themselves."

Troy put Rachel into counseling, and during the spring of 2005 she apparently stopped cutting herself. She spent the summer in Italy with her mother, and when she returned to Maryland in the fall, she told her father and stepmother that she was feeling better and didn't want to see a therapist anymore. Although Troy and Regina weren't churchgoers, Kathryn was a practicing Catholic, and Rachel decided to receive her first communion and to be confirmed at St. Martin of Tours Catholic Church in Gaithersburg. She had her mother's ability to sing, and joined the church choir. "Rachel was such a bubbly, happy person, from what I saw," says Susan Delgado of Gaithersburg, who taught the confirmation class, and whose daughter Christina sang with Rachel. "There were some problems at home, but what family doesn't have them?"

"For all intents and purposes, she was doing fine—everything was pretty normal," Troy says. He bought a new car and gave Rachel the blue Subaru. "But we were adamant that her car privileges were based on her doing her homework," he says. One Friday night, having discovered through online grade reporting that Rachel hadn't been doing her homework, Troy took away her car keys, preventing her from attending a birthday party. She responded by stabbing her forearm with a pair of scissors. Asked in the emergency room at Shady Grove Adventist Hospital in Rockville whether she was likely to harm herself again, Rachel said she might, and was transferred to the self-injury trauma unit at the Potomac Ridge Behavioral Health, also in Rockville. She stayed two nights before calling her father and asking him to bring her home. Against medical advice, he did, but he agreed to put Rachel back into

counseling and to have a psychiatrist evaluate her for possible drug therapy, according to her discharge documents. The documents also list the diagnosis given to Rachel as major depression and post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of her mother's leaving when she was 3.

"Rachel had a clear picture in her mind of her mother driving away in a Volvo we used to have," Troy says. "Obviously, Kathryn did not go to Italy in that car, but that was what Rachel remembered."

In the months after her release from Potomac Ridge, Rachel found a therapist she liked and also began group therapy. She was prescribed different mood stabilizers, including Wellbutrin, Abilify and Effexor—the last of which seemed to help her. She went to the senior prom and to graduation and continued to sing in the church choir. In the summer of 2006, Rachel traveled with her mother to Paris and then spent time with Trevor and her cousins in Florida. She began classes at Montgomery College and found a job she loved as a dog groomer at Pet Smart in Kentlands. She had a close circle of friends, including Pi, in whom to confide.

But a diary that Rachel kept after graduating from high school in June of 2006 reveals a starkly different picture than the face she presented to the world of a cheerful and attractive young woman who was overcoming difficulties and finding her way. She struggled nightly against the temptation to cut herself, even to end her life. In the first entry, Rachel wrote: "After last night where I got way too close to doing something, I am worried that I won't have enough self-control to stop myself. I have decided that I will write [here] every time I feel the urge."

What follows in the diary is a harrowing chronicle of Rachel's battles with a demon so powerful it seems to have almost physical dimensions: "I bounce off a promise made to many, and that stops the heaviest urges with time..."

In July, Rachel learned that her father was having an affair and that Troy's marriage to Regina would be ending. "And now the thing that I have been fearing almost my entire life is going to happen," she wrote. "They [Troy and Regina] are getting divorced." She describes her fury at her father, and her worry that she again was going to lose a mother: "I can't spend too much time around my family at this point, because I feel like I'm gonna snap in two." Rachel carried the red diary everywhere in her purse. Troy says he was aware of its existence, but refrained from reading it out of respect for her privacy. "Your kids are reaching a point of becoming an individual, and you want to respect that," he says. "[But] when there are health and safety issues, you probably shouldn't. A painful lesson learned."

Kathryn says Rachel seemed tense during their summer trip to Paris, and finally confided her nightly struggle not to harm herself. Alarmed, Kathryn again pleaded with her daughter to come live with her in Italy, but Rachel refused. "I think we denied how troubled she was, as well as denying the signs that her friend Rachel Smith was troubled," Kathryn writes. "We knew, but didn't know what to do about it, so basically [we] lived in denial of the danger."

A troubled 'guardian angel'

One glimmer of hope in the diary centers around a friend Rachel sometimes calls her "guardian angel"—a friend who even goes into Rachel's bathroom and removes her razor blades. It was Pi. "I am too heavy a burden for her," Rachel wrote. "I can't believe it actually resorted to her physically preventing me from hurting myself."

Pi, however, was only 16 and on shaky emotional ground herself. "Today when she was upset I told her [Pi] I was there for her...she says she drags me down, but it's not true...she is the reason I haven't attempted suicide again," Rachel wrote in September of 2006.

"Pi seemed to be helping Rachel, and that eased my worry [about the friendship] somewhat," says Christina Delgado, now 19, a close friend of Rachel's who was a grade behind her at Wootton and is a freshman at Lynchburg College in Lynchburg, Va. "They were really taking care of each other, but at the same time, I was uneasy," Christina says. "Pi was obsessed with death, and Rachel took that on."

Marian and Paul, who prefer to speak of their daughter as Rachel, recall a bright and talkative little girl, the middle child between an older sister, Lindsay, and a younger brother, Jason. She was the go to dog walker in their neighborhood, Paul says; she knew all the breeds and decided early on that she wanted to work with animals. When Pi was in elementary school, her parents owned and ran Bagel Capitol in Kentlands, where she would stand on a milk crate and ring up customers. "She loved it, and people who came in always asked, 'Where's Rachel?'" Marian says. "She had a very strong work ethic."

The Smiths closed the bagel store in 2003, and Paul became an insurance broker. Since 1998, Marian had taught preschool at their synagogue, Congregation B'nai Tzedek, in Potomac—work that enabled her to be home with her children after school. "Even when Rachel was 16, she had to ride her bike with a friend, so there was the buddy system," Marian says. "I always made sure the doors were locked. That's the mom I was—on top of things."

When Pi was in fifth grade, the Smiths observed an increasing seriousness and rigidity in her; as a crossing guard, she wrote up children who committed even minor violations of the rules.

"She lost a lot of friends," Marian says. "Now I believe what was happening to her was hormonal."

Pi had always been small for her age, and the endocrinologist the Smiths first consulted when she was 2 had told them their daughter would probably be a late bloomer, and continue to grow in college. But when Pi was 10, and 4 feet 6 inches tall, she got her first period. The endocrinologist told Marian that the growth plates on Pi's bones were closing and that she would probably grow only another inch now that puberty had started. "You want your kid to have every advantage," Marian says, "and 4 feet 6 inches wasn't where she was supposed to be." Pi was given a hormone to suppress puberty, and then was put on growth hormones, which involved daily, self-administered injections which rotated around the belly, arms and legs. "She took it for a year and a half, and then she said, 'No more,'" Marian says. "Thank God, it worked." Pi was 5 feet 2 inches tall when she died.

The Smiths say they noticed a gradual change in their daughter, who spent more time with her friends or alone in her room and less time with her family. But, Marian says, "it was really gradual. And you don't know where the line is: Where is the line for adolescence, and where is the line for where there's another problem? It wasn't as if something said, 'Boo.'"

The reason for their daughter's withdrawal from them, the Smiths say, was her anger over being made to take the growth hormones. "It was a loss of control," Paul says. "She was a very independent person, and she didn't have a choice. She had to give herself a shot every day, and she was small and very muscular, so it hurt her. And I think over the years...she became more and more furious with us. That teenage angst thing of, 'you don't know shit, I'll make my own decisions, because the last decision you made for me, look what happened.' She never said it like that, but that was my interpretation." And yet, Paul says, knowing what they now know, they would not have decided differently about the hormone shots. "A 10-year-old is not capable of making a life decision like that," he says.

As a freshman at Wootton, Paul and Marian say, Pi swallowed five or six Tylenols one morning and became sick. She told them she was too ill to go to school, but they didn't find out why until almost a year later. "When she said she was sick, we said OK, because she never missed school," Marian says.

In January of 2006, the winter of her sophomore year, Pi was in her room, instant-messaging a friend, when she confided about the Tylenol episode, adding that she needed help and wanted to be put out of her misery. Pi implored her friend not to tell; the friend, who was in college, promised, but then promptly called her own mother, who called the Smith house. Marian was busy downstairs and didn't answer the telephone, assuming the caller would leave a message if it was important. The mother then called a neighbor of the Smiths, who came over and pounded on the door. The police had also been called, but Marian didn't understand when she was told that her daughter needed help. "I said, 'What are you talking about? I'm right here.' "

Marian led the police upstairs to Pi's room. She was at her computer—not visibly distressed, but dismayed by all the people suddenly in her room. The Smiths then followed a police suggestion that Pi be taken to the Montgomery County Crisis Center in Rockville, where counselors interviewed her. "They thought she was OK," Marian says, "but that it might be good for her to pursue counseling of some sort." Marian made appointments, but Pi told her, "You can't make me speak." Pi's college friend sent Marian a copy of her IM exchange with Pi, which Marian printed out and took along to show to Pi's therapists. "I would go in with her, and try to get her going," Marian says. "Because even if she was angry or crying, something would come out." As soon as that happened, Marian says, Pi would tell her that she didn't like the therapist, and they would begin again with another one. "With each person, I'd say, 'Do you think there's a problem?' and they'd say, 'No, we just need to keep working on her to get her to open up.' "

The Crisis Center also recommended that the Smiths notify their daughter's school. Marian says she telephoned Pi's counselor at Wootton the day after the incident and told her what had happened. That sparked a series of miscommunications and misunderstandings. According to Marian, the counselor asked to have access to Pi's mental health records, but Marian didn't want to allow that. "I thought it wasn't in Rachel's best interest— that this would follow her, even to college," she says. "It was a privacy issue." But she says she was perfectly willing to let the counselor work with her daughter. The counselor phoned several more times, asking that a release be signed, but Marian increasingly felt that the concern was merely bureaucratic and told the counselor to stop calling her about it. "I said, 'I don't feel that you're concerned with my child,'" Marian says. "She never contacted me again after that."

Marian says she was now worried enough about her daughter to begin looking through her things while she was at school. She found a diary entry describing the first time Pi had cut herself, accidentally, while fiddling with a pen top in class. Subsequent diary entries suggested to Marian that her daughter's cutting herself had become a habit. When confronted, Pi admitted to the cutting, and Marian says that she tried to get her to stop by forbidding her to go away with friends for the weekend unless she promised not to cut while she was gone. "If Rachel promised something, she would do it," Marian says. "Her word was gold."

But the pauses in cutting were always temporary. Marian asked the therapists who were seeing

Pi how serious a concern the cutting should be, "but I was told by many [of them] that cutting did not lead to suicide," Marian says. Pi wrote a paper on cutting for a health class during the spring of her sophomore year and got an "A" on it. Marian discovered the paper after her daughter's disappearance, with a Post-it note from the teacher still attached, in which the teacher offered to talk to Pi about the subject of her essay. "I never heard about that, and I never saw the paper," Marian says. "Do you look at everything your child writes for school? Rachel was getting A's."

'She would do anything not to tell me'

In the spring of 2006, Marian says, some of Pi's friends told a teacher that they were worried about her, and the teacher notified Pi's counselor. Pi, the teacher and the counselor then met in the counselor's office, Marian says.

According to Jay Bass, the head of counseling at Wootton, Montgomery County Public Schools require a teacher to send a student to a counselor if the student shows signs of mental distress. "If there's any perception that there's suicidal ideation, the student is referred to the [Montgomery County Crisis Center] and a parent has to pick them up immediately." Marian says her daughter became extremely upset in the counselor's office, but that she was sent, still weeping, back to class. Marian says she learned of the incident that night from Rachel's sister Lindsay, a senior at the time, who told her mother that she'd received a text message from a friend in Rachel's class saying that her sister was hysterical in class.

Marian went upstairs to ask what had happened, but her daughter insisted she was fine. "I said, 'Rachel, I'm here for you, whatever you need, can you please tell me what happened?' [She told me] 'I'm fine.' I stayed in her room the entire evening, and she fell asleep on the floor, doing her homework. She would do anything not to tell me," Marian says. She adds, "And I would have done anything for her."

The next morning, Marian called the principal's office, but says Doran did not take her call. She then called Pi's counselor to say that she and Paul would be coming in immediately to meet with her. At that meeting, which the Smiths say the assistant principal, Frank Critten, also attended, Paul says they were told they weren't called about the incident because the counselor, after the earlier dispute over Pi's medical records, felt that Marian's message was not to bother them again. After the meeting, Marian says, Critten told the Smiths that the incident could have been handled better. "No apology," Marian says. "That was it: 'Things could have been handled better.' "

Like Principal Doran, Critten says he does not want to add to the family's grief by answering their charges.

"As a community of 2,400 kids who don't always make good decisions, we're probably even more alert now," says Doran, who adds that one in 10 high school students suffers from depression. "We always take it seriously," he says.

Bass, who joined Wootton's staff in the fall of 2007, says procedures for dealing with at-risk students have not changed since the two Rachels' suicides, although the school now has a receptacle where students can leave anonymous messages if they believe a classmate is in trouble. "We always follow up," Bass says.

In September 2006, Wootton, along with five other Montgomery County high schools, piloted two one-hour mental health classes, known as Red Flags, in the 10th-grade health curriculum. The lessons highlight signs of teen depression and suicidal ideation and encourage students to tell a responsible adult if they observe worrisome symptoms among their classmates. More than once that fall, according to Marian, a group of Pi's friends approached the school counselor to say they were worried about her. She says the friends were told, "The parents are aware, and we are aware." The counselor has since retired and did not wish to be interviewed for this story.

The Smiths, however, say they had no idea how distressed their daughter was. Pi's friends did not come to them with their concerns, Marian says. "Her friends had bonded, and kept each other's secrets—they were loyal to her," she says. "You do the best you can," she adds. "You let [your children] know in every way possible that you want to help them, and it's up to the child how much they will allow you to be part of their world." Increasingly, the world of both Rachels was shrinking in the fall of 2006. Christina Delgado saw Rachel Crites pulling away from her and becoming wrapped up with Pi and another girl, the three of whom shared a secret notebook. "There were a lot of inside jokes," Christina says. "She [Rachel Crites] made a game of it. Everything was a secret, and it was really unnerving." Now Christina thinks she knows why Rachel pulled away: A year earlier, Christina had told the parents of another friend that their daughter was considering suicide. "She [the other friend] didn't speak to me after that, but I didn't care—she was trying to kill herself," Christina says. "And Rachel knew that whatever hint I got of [a suicide plan], I would go straight to her parents."

Christina says she never saw the contents of the secret notebook, but assumed it was some kind of collaborative novel. In fact, it was a shared journal, which the police found in the Subaru after the girls' deaths, called "Perfect Fuck-Ups." The notebook lists elaborate rules and assigns code names to the three participants, who passed it among themselves. The entries are a

disconcerting jumble of the ordinary and the terrifying. Pi's first entry begins with the transcription of a flirtatious text message exchanged between her and a boy she likes, who rejects her. She also vents her grief and rage at her parents over having to return Buddy to the kennel: "He was my everything, and now I have nothing. Except my amazing friends."

Rachel describes grocery shopping and going to a shooting range with her father, her excitement over a new choir class and her overwhelming desire to cut herself deeper and draw more blood. She also wrote about a plan the three girls had to become "blood sisters" by cutting themselves. "I am looking forward to this ritual. I am going to be connected to the two people that I love and care about the most...I owe my life to both of you." In fewer than 20 pages, the notebook is a chronicle of girls simultaneously flirting with life—and death.

'I'm actually happy!'

In late October of 2006, Rachel Crites' private diary changed radically. "I'm actually happy!" she wrote. "No urges last night. I'm smiling, laughing, and having a good time." At the bottom of the page, in small letters, she added, "Thank you." The black rose she drew at the end of all her entries now appeared without thorns. The timing of this abrupt reversal coincided with when her medication, Effexor, should have begun to take effect. Rachel told her father she no longer needed group therapy, and Troy agreed to let her quit.

"Things were getting better with Rachel," Troy says. "I didn't know then that most people kill themselves when they start to feel better because they actually have the energy to go through with it." Two nights before her death, Troy and Rachel were at home watching American Idol, "laughing our asses off at the people who were really bad," Troy says, "figuring out who might do well, and I'm like, 'How's things going, Rachel?' She said, 'Really great.' We had just gone online to register her for the next semester at Montgomery College."

The Smiths, too, say there were no signs in the days leading up to mid-January of 2007 that their daughter intended to kill herself, such as giving away possessions or saying goodbye. "She had just decorated her room," Marian says, pointing out that Pi had spent \$400 of her own money to frame posters of dogs. "She had signed up for driver's ed and studied for her tests. All her dreams were about the future." Goodman, the psychotherapist who appears at public meetings with Troy, says the late teenage years are a time when abstract thinking is highly developed, but impulse control is still rudimentary, creating a dangerous mix for depressed teenagers. Many teenagers who have attempted suicide have reported to Goodman that they didn't actually want to die, she says. "They just wanted the pain to go away. Later, they are very glad that they worked through their difficulties by learning healthier ways of coping," Goodman says.

Troy doesn't believe that Pi and Rachel decided to commit suicide immediately after they were ticketed on Jan. 18. That's because his daughter called him shortly afterward and asked him to see whether a meeting could be set up for her, Regina and her therapist. (Regina had not wanted to give Rachel a key to her new house, Troy says, believing that Rachel would share her key with him, and Rachel took this as a personal rejection. Regina declined to comment for this story, saying that for now she prefers to grieve privately.)

The girls scrapped the horseback riding plan, returned to Rockville and went to see Eragon, a dragon movie with themes of self-sacrifice, death, rebirth and eternal devotion. Afterward, they went to Rachel Crites' home, fetched a shotgun and an Heirloom Luger that Troy owned and kept unloaded, and tried to buy ammunition at Atlantic Guns on Hungerford Drive in Rockville, just down the block from Animal Exchange, where Pi regularly bought birdseed for her parakeet.

The shop owner, realizing that the two girls knew nothing about guns and couldn't clearly explain why they wanted shotgun shells, refused to sell them any. They tried again at the same store a short time later with the Luger, and were turned away again. Rachel telephoned a friend from the Wootton track team whose father collected guns and asked if she could borrow one. The friend said the guns were locked up, but it didn't occur to her until days later to consider why Rachel might have wanted one.

The girls bought a stash of candy, rented another movie, Grease, and obtained permission to have a sleepover at Rachel's. Paul says Pi stopped by their house, saying she had to pack an overnight bag. "She said, 'Bye, Dad, I'll see you later,'" and that was the last time I saw her." The girls then went out for an expensive meal at Grapeseed Bistro in Bethesda. Troy and Kathryn had taken their daughter there on different occasions to celebrate special events.

When Troy returned home from a dinner in Washington, D.C., the girls were in Rachel's room watching the movie on her laptop. He called "good night" through the closed door, but did not see them then or in the morning, when he got up early to go to work. Rachel called him around noon, as she routinely did, to discuss dinner plans. She told him that she and Pi were going to a movie and dinner in Georgetown, but that they would be home by 11 p.m., which was Pi's curfew. "I have thought over that phone conversation many times," Troy says. "Rachel said, 'I love you,' and actually lied to me about getting back to walk the dogs, but there was nothing that made any alarm bells go off in my head. It was a pretty standard phone call in day-to-day life with an 18-year-old."

The girls made one more unsuccessful attempt to buy shotgun shells at Atlantic Guns. This time, the store owner followed them outside, wrote down the license plate number of the Subaru and called police. But the report wasn't matched with the case of the two missing Rachels until three days later. The girls went to Home Depot, bought a Shop Vac hose and drove to a remote corner of Loudoun County on the West Virginia border. Early in the afternoon, Pi called her mother and said she was going to turn her cell phone off because the battery was low, but promised to check in periodically to coordinate plans for walking the family's dog.

Marian began to worry where her daughter was at about five minutes after 11. "Rachel was so responsible—she was never late," Marian says. But she and Paul decided to wait until 11:30, in case they had mistaken the curfew time. Then they called the police and Troy, who had gone to bed early. He went into Rachel's room and found what looked like a suicide note inside a notebook on her desk. It included the line, "Wherever I end up laying, whether buried or cremated, I want to stay w/my true love, Pi, buried next to her."

NBC4 News interviewed Troy the next morning about the girls' disappearance, but initially he didn't reveal the exact contents of the note. "They started walking out the door and I realized everyone was going to think it's just two rich girls who ran away," he says. "I made a quick decision and ripped out the note and gave it to them. If the girls were still alive—and I was already afraid they might not be—I wanted them to be looked for." The story quickly became national news, and thousands of people around the country called police or left messages on the Facebook and MySpace accounts that Troy had set up, claiming to have spotted the missing girls or the blue Subaru. Capt. Kathi Rhodes, director of the Montgomery County Family Crimes Division, worked closely with Troy, and called in three former FBI agents to help follow up on every plausible lead, Troy says. Kathryn flew in from Italy with Norberto and joined Troy in television interviews, pleading with the girls to come home if they were in hiding. "I knew the story had a slightly salacious angle, with the mention of 'true love,'" Troy says, "but I didn't care if I could use the media for my purpose, which was to find them."

The idea that the girls were a thwarted romantic couple was discussed on Internet blogs, and, according to Christina Delgado, at Wootton by kids who didn't know them. Troy doesn't think they were romantically involved, but he believes "they may have experimented sexually with each other, which is all part of discovering where your sexuality lies."

Marian says she once asked her daughter whether she and Rachel Crites were "more than friends." She says Pi replied, "I hate to disappoint you, Mom, but I like guys."

"I said to her, 'Rachel, I don't care one way or the other. We'll love you no matter what.' They're not here to have the conversation," Marian says, "but as far as we and Troy knew, they were two girls who counted on each other, depended on each other and understood each other." Both girls described themselves as straight in their MySpace pages; Pi wrote that she would like to marry "the perfect man, who makes me feel complete."

An outpouring of support

One clue to the girls' whereabouts came in the Jan. 19 phone call Pi made to her mother. Pi said she was calling from Georgetown, but the call was traced to a cell phone tower in West Virginia. Scores of volunteers combed that area, as well as swaths of Maryland and Virginia. It was an outpouring of support that deeply moved both families. People would simply show up at the families' front doors, offering to join a search party or help in any way they could. "They would come on Saturday and then again on Sunday," Marian says. "I would look out the window and just cry. That people would drop what was happening in their lives to help us."

On Feb. 2, two weeks after the girls had disappeared, Kathryn and Norberto decided to return to Italy. Later that day, two men riding all-terrain vehicles through the snowy woods of Loudoun County, Va., spotted a blue Subaru parked in a rugged area near a utility trail far from the main road. The car doors were locked and the license plates had been covered with duct tape. Kathryn was on her way to the airport when Troy reached her with the news that the girls' bodies had been found.

Rachel's purse was in the car, and it contained the red-covered diary, as well as a notebook page in her handwriting with the heading, Why do people commit suicide? "They have a mental depression, they have a bad family, they have a good family that got divorced and the divorce depressed them," Rachel wrote. She also wrote, "Does hell exist? Do you have to be perfect to go to heaven? Why do people cheat on others?" Interspersed with these questions she wrote that she hoped to have a successful life, and that her children would not have to go through her divorce.

Rachel's purse also had a page filled with similar musings written in Pi's neat hand in various colors of ink. "What to die for? What makes you think that will ease anything?" she wrote. And, "Just keep that crazy sideways smile on your face and nobody will notice a thing."

The girls were given separate funerals, but the two families attended each ceremony. Over 800 mourners filled Congregation B'nai Tzedek in Potomac for Pi's funeral; a police escort led the funeral procession up I-270 to the Garden of Remembrance Memorial Park in Clarksburg where

she was buried. Marian says the outpouring of kindness and support from the community sustained the Smiths through the search and its aftermath: "I would tell people, 'we are so lucky. You are lucky, too, and God willing, you will never have to know it.' "

"The search for the Rachels that so many of you helped with did not go in vain," Troy told mourners at a packed St. Martin of Tours Catholic Church in Gaithersburg, where his daughter had sung in the choir. "While the result was not what any of us would have wished, it did bring the world a little closer together, and it brought out the very best in humanity...It made us all aware of the true dangers of depression and teen suicide. It made us all more aware of the importance of a hug. For Rachel's sake, let us not lose what we have gained."

The families considered burying the girls side by side in an ecumenical cemetery, Marian says, but since her daughter had left no instructions, they decided against it. Rachel Crites is buried in Parklawn Memorial Park in Rockville. Pi and Rachel's friends dedicated two pages in the 2007 Wootton yearbook to the girls, who look joyous and lovely, surrounded by beaming friends and family in every photograph.

For the past two years since Rachel Smith's death, B'nai B'rith Girls, a Jewish service organization to which Pi belonged, has sponsored a spring dog walk in her memory. Last year it rained, Marian says, and yet a hundred people and their dogs showed up. The family also established the Rachel Smith Youth Fund, which sponsors a program where at-risk teens work with shelter animals at the Montgomery County Humane Society.

In the two years since his daughter's death, Troy Crites has been on a mission to educate himself and others about the dangers of teenage depression and suicide. He says he learned that Rachel's group therapist had strongly recommended that Rachel not drop out, and that a message the therapist left on the answering machine had somehow been missed. "So here's another rule: Kids don't get to decide whether they need counseling. Because they're kids."

Along with Goodman, Troy urges a strengthening of communications among mental health professionals, schools and parents. Though MCPS requires schools to inform parents if they suspect a child is troubled, there is no reverse requirement that parents tell the school if their child is in counseling. "Most parents don't tell," Troy says. "You have no problem with dropping off the cough syrup at the principal's office, but you're not going to drop off the Effexor."

Troy has started a suicide awareness Web site, www.foods-4-thought.org, which offers information, resources and a forum for teenagers and recipes. The idea behind the recipes, Troy says, is to get people talking about the issues of depression and suicide over good meals and wine. "They might be the most depressing dinners we ever have," he concedes.

Even for a man of Troy's apparently boundless energy, the effort to speak openly about suicide can be taxing. Recently, Troy was playing golf with a man he didn't know who inquired politely whether he had children. "And I wondered—should I say it, or not?" Troy says. "But since I'm always saying we shouldn't hide all this, I told him about Rachel...Neither one of us managed to hit a ball straight the next four holes after that. Now he probably has a better appreciation of the dangers, and maybe his kids are better off. So maybe it was worth four holes of golf."

The Smiths also have come to believe that speaking out is less painful than silence. "Talk to your friends, because chances are if you're having trouble with your kids, they are, too," Paul says. "There's no sense in keeping family secrets, because maybe somebody knows somebody who can help."

The two families that once communicated mainly about curfews and sleepover logistics have now formed a powerful emotional bond. "Troy knows what we suffer, and we know what he suffers," Marian says.

Kathryn, who had not spoken publicly about her daughter until now, writes that "today, I consider Troy the only other person on the planet who understands the pain of this loss." She says she now wishes she had known "that the warning signs are true. That kids don't lie. They express themselves with devastating honesty. That it is worth upsetting any situation, our comfort levels, our nicely arranged lives, in order to reach kids who are angry, think they aren't loved, think that life isn't worth living."

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THE WARNING SIGNS

Nationwide, suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15- to 19-year-olds. After 15 years of decline, the suicide rate among teenagers increased 8 percent in 2004 (with the rate for teenage girls aged 15 to 19 going up 34 percent), and the numbers have remained disturbingly high, according to data from the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. According to a 2000-2006 study by the Maryland Committee on Youth Suicide Prevention, Montgomery County, along with Prince George's County, has the

highest number of teen suicides in the state, although they are also the counties with the highest populations. Eighty-six percent of Maryland teen suicides are males, although females comprise 70 percent of attempted suicides. Girls who attempt suicide most often use cutting or piercing as a method.

Experts agree that depression among teenagers is treatable and that suicide is preventable. Alan Ezagui, president of the Potomac Ridge Behavioral Health Foundation, a nonprofit that helps fund Rockville's Potomac Ridge Behavioral Health center, says that on average, there is a seven-year delay between the onset of mental illness and the beginning of treatment. "Mental health is as critical as physical health for parents to keep an eye on," Ezagui says. "Teen depression will not go away by itself, but due to parental denial and stigma, treatment often isn't sought until there is an emergency."

Signs that a child may be suicidal include withdrawal from family and friends, drawings or writings about death, increased use of drugs or alcohol, risky behavior, changes in eating or sleeping habits and the giving away of prized possessions. According to Dr. Steven Israel, medical director at Potomac Ridge, parents should be attentive to situations that might cause their teenager extreme emotional pain: failure, loss of a relationship or source of support, social rejection or shaming.

"Since any loss can feel like a life-or-death situation to a teen, having a loss can therefore be the trigger that causes a depressed teen to become acutely suicidal," says Rockville psychotherapist Joan Goodman. "Even a perceived loss of parental approval may be devastating to a seemingly high-functioning straight-A student who gets his or her first B on a test. Since they seek total perfection in every aspect of their lives, it becomes not OK if they encounter a problem, make a mistake or are not OK."

While one warning sign may not be a clear indication of suicidal intent, parents should act when they suspect something is not right with their child. "Don't be afraid to ask your child[ren] if they have thought of hurting or killing themselves," says Lisa Huka Covington, founder and executive director of the Baltimore-based SPEAK, or Suicide Prevention Education Awareness for Kids. "Parents fear they might be putting ideas in their child's head, but that doesn't happen with a non-suicidal person," she says, adding that by asking the question, a parent gives the child permission to speak about suicide. "If the answer is 'Yes,' ask if they have a method in mind," says Huka Covington. "If they do, get help immediately."

A 2008 study reported in the *New England Journal of Medicine* says that children and adolescents show more improvement when they receive a combination of talk and drug therapies than if they receive only one kind of treatment. "It is essential for a depressed, self-injurious, acutely suicidal teenager to receive the full treatment combination of psychotherapy as well as taking psychotropic medication," Goodman says, explaining that parents sometimes question the value of treatment if their child is resistant to getting help or is unwilling to talk to a therapist. A troubled child doesn't get to decide whether or not to go to therapy, she says. "Parents have much more power than they realize to make it happen."

Since 2004, when the FDA instituted "black-box" warnings on antidepressant drugs stating that "antidepressants increase the risk of suicidal thinking and behavior (suicidality) in children and adolescents with major depressive disorder (MDD) and other psychiatric disorders," many parents have stopped giving their children the drugs. But Israel says studies have shown that the suicide rate has gone up as the frequency of antidepressant use has diminished. "So don't let the worry deprive your child of a potentially life-saving treatment," he says. Problems such as increased suicidal thoughts tend to happen early in the treatment, and parents should be especially vigilant then, he explains: "It's not as if someone will be stable for months and all of a sudden become suicidal."

For young people who refuse to speak to an individual therapist, or who become involved in worrisome friendships, group therapy is usually the answer, Goodman says. In her experience, "Teenagers who refuse to open up when they are alone with a therapist often will not stop talking once you put them into a room with other kids. Since teens are eager for feedback from peers, the group becomes their safe haven for hearing that they are not alone in what they are feeling."

The federal Centers for Disease Control also stresses that more education is needed, so that teachers, parents and others can quickly spot troubled teenagers. As a school administrator, Wootton Principal Michael Doran has confronted one frustrating obstacle to getting parents and schools to work together on the issue—parents who don't show up at the school's annual presentation on teen depression and suicide. As part of the Montgomery County Mental Health Association's Red Flags program, he says, all parents of 10th-grade Wootton students are invited to a presentation on the warning signs of

adolescent depression, but, Doran says, only 10 or 12 parents usually attend. "We have more people on the stage than in the audience. And this is a school where parents are involved," he says. "If it's a meeting about college applications, it's standing room only. So I would say, if you're busy, as most parents are, miss one back-to-school night and come to this instead. It's a bit of a downer, but it's worth it."

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