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Helping each other heal in tragedy's aftermath

ZACH KAUFMAN GUEST COLUMN

Like many of you, Suzanne Jovin has been on my mind every day since her unfortunate death and like many of you, I had known her a little — through my classes and casual meetings with her. Since her death, in our dining halls and meetings with each other, we have talked about her and her life, and its horrible end.

However, as we all know, her life, albeit short, was plentiful. She touched many — from her family and friends, to the people she worked with at the Best Buddies program. Her life also taught us. Perhaps the most important thing it taught us was the true existence and importance of community. In that way, she has taught many lessons to people she never knew.

Suzanne died on Friday, December 4, 1998. It was an otherwise bright and beautiful day and we were entering Reading Week. Immediately after her death, our community and various pockets of it united to grieve for Suzanne and also to help each other deal with this tragedy.

Although it was Reading Week, usually a time when we lock ourselves away in libraries and in our rooms in preparation for our finals, many of us put

down our pencils and books for a while to unite together in dining halls, common rooms, dorm rooms, and all over the campus.

Hundreds circled the Women's Table to honor Suzanne with a candlelight vigil. We passed a living flame between us — strangers and friends — as we lighted each other's candles and shared a time of silent group meditation. As more joined the circle, the warmth of the flame spread and the bond of our community strengthened.

As I walked home, it struck me that this person had seen someone in as much pain as herself and selflessly comforted him.

I saw students holding hands and hugging each other. Thousands attended the beautiful and painfully sad memorial service in Battell Chapel. We heard and shared stories about a person who, in many ways, is like each of us. Still others actively grieved with each other in less for-

mal, yet equally important ways. In dining halls, on the street, and on the phone, we talked about a student who was very much like us in so many ways.

For many of us, this was the first peer we ever knew who died. This familiarity with Suzanne — as someone like us and as a member of our community — made this experience so shocking. It has been a time for us all to think about Suzanne, each other, and our own mortality.

Something special happened to me during all of this and I will never forget it. Immediately after the candlelight vigil, I went to the Trumbull College Master's House for a post-vigil gathering. Once there, all I could do was sit down on a chair and cry — my head in my hands.

After a while, I felt a hand rubbing my back, trying to soothe me. I realized it was a woman after I heard her crying as well. I never raised my head to look at her, but we held each other and cried together for a very long time, never speaking. I assumed it was someone I knew — a friend.

When we finally got up to leave, I looked at her face and it was totally unfamiliar.

It was someone I had never met before and I don't think she knew me either.

As I walked home, it struck me that this person had seen someone in as much pain as herself and selflessly comforted him. What a wonderful person, I thought, and what a truly remarkable event. I do not know her name. Thank you, whoever you are.

At a time when we usually concentrate on ourselves, many of us concentrated on Suzanne and each other.

This is a lesson of community — that, especially during personally difficult times, we often must leave our own work and worries to care for each other. We also learned a lot about Suzanne and what a truly inspirational person she had been.

This also teaches us another lesson — that among us, our family, friends, and strangers, are remarkable people.

We should not take anyone or anything for granted, but rather get to know each other, celebrate our community, and give the most we can of ourselves.

Let us not forget what we have learned: about Suzanne, about our community, and about ourselves.

Goodbye, Suzanne, and you will always be an inspiration and teacher to me and the rest of us.

Zach Kaufman is a junior in Saybrook College. He is the president of the Yale College Council.