Listen to This

August 12, 2010 is a day that Mayfield High School will certainly never forget. To most, it seemed like a typical Wednesday. The weather was warm, and school was lingering a few short weeks ahead. But then everything changed after a short glance through the newsfeed on Facebook. There I saw it, “Rest in peace Dan Smith”.

The night before I was at an end-of-summer bonfire with a huge group of kids. We were all hanging out and trying to make the most of our final days of summer. Dan had been there with all of us. I was never super close to Dan, but we were surrounded by the same group of kids. All I really knew about him was that he was the same age as me (16 at the time), played Varsity golf, dated one of the popular girls, and had moved here a year ago from California.

At the bonfire, even I knew something was up. He was about to get into a fight with one of the other guys over some problem with his girlfriend, or ex-girlfriend at the time. Dan and his girlfriend had been notorious for being that on-again, off-again couple in high school. Dan was yelling at the other guy and things were getting heated. Dan’s friends, whom were standing right next to me, pulled him aside and said it was time to leave. I could hear Dan complaining about being upset. I heard his friends scoff at his remarks, they told him to stop being overly dramatic and that she was “just another girl”. They let Dan leave in his 1998 white Lexus only after promising that he would not “do anything stupid”. I watched him get into his car and drive off; he said he was heading home.

But Dan never actually made it home that night. There it was on the local news, “Teen Killed in Car Accident”. After he left the bonfire, he was driving along Interstate 75 in Ohio. A state trooper clocked him car going 122 miles per hour. The trooper followed the white Lexus down the highway until his speed began rapidly increasing, and went far off into the distance. The vehicle struck the concrete median barrier on the left side, careened across the highway, slammed into a parked tractor-trailer and immediately burst into flames. Dan, who was not wearing his seat belt, was ejected from the vehicle. Right before he crashed, he called his ex-girlfriend, who had apparently been the main reason he had been upset that night, and said, “Listen to this”. On August 12th at 12:30 p.m. Dan Smith was instantly killed upon impact. He had broken his promise to his friends, that he “wouldn’t do anything stupid”.

After allowing all of this to digest in my mind, the first question I thought of was why did I let him leave? I was at the bonfire with him and I had seen how upset he was, and had seen that he was clearly troubled. But I, like everyone else at the bonfire, let him leave without question. It would have been so easy to stop him, tell him that he should stay until he calmed down, but none of us realized the reality of the situation prior to the aftermath.

The ultimate question of this entire situation: why didn’t I say something? After all of this happened, I thought about that question for a while. Eventually I came to terms with that fact that, regardless of what I wish I had done, there was absolutely no way to go back and fix everything. Looking back on what happened, it’s really easy to think that I could have influenced the situation by speaking out against the crowd. But there were numerous outside factors that kept me, or anyone else, from saying anything. Dan was a popular kid, and well-liked by everyone. Even though we were all a distant group of friends, he hung out with the kids that were well known throughout all 2,200 students. It can be incredibly hard to stand up to someone if they are more popular, or in a higher authoritative power. Stereotypically, if one tries to stand up to someone they consider “popular” they might be made fun of, ignored, or mocked for being “boring” or a “goody two shoes”. At that moment, I did not feel that it was my job to say something about what I saw happening. Dan was talking to his friends, and even though I heard their conversation, I figured they were handling it. Even though I felt uneasy when I saw Dan leave, I figured it was not my responsibility to stop him. Dan’s friends had a sense of power over me. I felt like I could not speak up against them, especially after they told Dan to “stop being overly dramatic”. I did not want to be the next victim of their criticism and I did not want to seem like I did not fit in with the crowd. Even though I had ample opportunity to stop him, like everyone else at the bonfire, I did not say anything.

Certain situations, involving power relations, can have an influence over communication and one’s ability to speak what is on their mind. In this specific story, the influence of authority dealing with popularity kept me from speaking my mind. Even though I had opportune time to say something to prevent the situation, I remained silent. The struggle of power and the need to fit in with the crowd was the main factor that prevented me from saying anything. Even if I had spoken up, I may not have had an influence over what Dan chose to do. The ultimate fear of speaking out against the crowd challenged my urge to speak out. Looking back, it is easy to think I should have spoken out against what I heard Dan’s friends say to him, but I did not, because the need to fit in outweighed the importance of speaking your mind no matter what situation.