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Unbending Rules on Drugs in Schools Drive One Teen to the Breaking Point

By [Marc Fisher](#)
Sunday, April 5, 2009; Page C01

Josh Anderson had just finished four homework assignments. He did his laundry. He watched TV with his mother -- "House," which he had Tivo'd for viewing that night. He played with the dogs. Then, at his mom's urging, he went up to bed. It was 12:30, and the next day, March 19, was a big one: Josh was scheduled for a hearing that probably would end with his expulsion from the Fairfax County school system.



A recent photo of Josh Anderson. His parents say Fairfax's zero-tolerance policy on drugs doesn't give educators and parents a chance to help teens. (Family Photo)

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THIS STORY

Unbending Rules on Drugs in Schools Drive One Teen to the Breaking Point

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The Andersons weren't blind to what got Josh into this pickle. He had been caught leaving campus, going to Taco Bell with a friend. When the boys returned to South Lakes High in Reston, an assistant principal confronted them in the parking lot, smelled marijuana and had the car searched. This was the second time in two years that Josh, a junior, had been found with pot.

"I really have been working hard on this," Josh wrote to the hearing officers. "I can't believe I'm putting my parents through this now. I can't believe how selfish and stupid I've been. . . . I'm honestly going to try my hardest to fix this."

The Andersons were told that Josh would be barred from any regular Fairfax high school and might be tossed out of the system entirely. His parents were looking into private schools or moving.

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But there would be no hearing no new

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But there would be no hearing, no new school, no more visits from college football coaches asking about Josh's talents.

When Sue Anderson went into her son's room the next morning, he was dead. Without a word to his girlfriend, parents, psychologist, coach or teachers, Josh Anderson, 17, had killed himself.

He left a note, just two lines. "Why does it have to be like this?" And, to his girlfriend, "I love you."

There is little anger in Tim and Sue Anderson's voices now. Waves of grief strike at random intervals. Their eyes water when they look up the stairs toward Josh's room in their house in Vienna. They don't want to sue anyone. They praise coaches and teachers at South Lakes who did what they could to help their boy. But they have come to believe that the system did Josh a terrible wrong, that the zero-tolerance mentality contradicts the goal of educating or helping an immature adolescent.

"No one can ever answer whether Fairfax County was responsible for what Josh did," says Tim Anderson. "But they pushed him closer to the edge than he needed to be." The parents know their son's often-silent manner masked emotional troubles, but he had been in counseling, both through the school system and privately, and no one saw this coming. The trauma of facing expulsion, the Andersons believe, was just too much for their son.

In Fairfax, possession of marijuana on school grounds means automatic suspension and a recommendation of expulsion. "There's no discretion at the school level," says Paul Regnier, spokesman for the system. "Virginia law requires that if there's possession of marijuana on school grounds, the student must be expelled unless there are special circumstances."

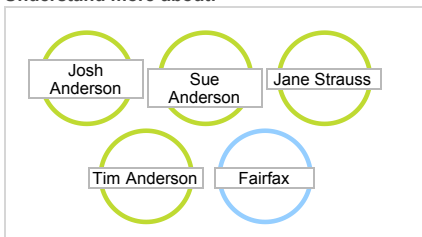
The Andersons' living room is a makeshift shrine to a boy everyone half expects to be there the next morning. Josh's football helmets frame the coffee table, which is crowded with his photos. A friend collected dozens of Facebook tributes and made a book for his parents. More than a thousand people -- many of them kids from South Lakes and Langley, which Josh attended before he was caught with pot the first time -- attended the funeral. The kids still come by, some just to sit in Josh's room. Some ask if they can take something to remember him by.

It can seem like mere chance that those kids are here and Josh is a collection of memories. (Sue is recording those at <http://rememberingjosh.blogspot.com>). "If they searched every backpack and car at Langley and South Lakes, what portion of the students would be suspended and sent to other schools?" Sue asks.

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