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A Tragedy With No Villain

By Jo-ann Armao
Saturday, April 11, 2009; Page A13

Every time I attend a home game of the Washington Capitals, I am entertained by the ritual that accompanies a goal scored against the opposing team. "One, two, three . . . It's all your fault," the crowd chants, fingers pointing, at that team's goalie. No one really cares if it's true, but it sure is easy -- not to mention fun -- having someone to blame.

Perhaps that's why we do the same thing in real life (and, as a journalist, I'm one of the best practitioners). The economy tanks, four little girls are murdered, public monies are squandered -- "One, two, three . . . it's all [fill in the blank] fault." Surely, though, there are limits. I reached mine in recent days watching the debate over the suicide of a 17-year-old in Fairfax County.

Post columnist [Marc Fisher detailed](#) the heartbreaking story of Josh Anderson, who killed himself on the eve of a hearing to determine whether he should be expelled from school after he was caught with pot on campus. Were Virginia's zero-tolerance rules for drug use to blame, as Fisher wondered? Or, as some readers countered in online comments, were there things Anderson's parents should have done differently?

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I cannot begin to imagine the horror Josh's parents are enduring, but I know a little about what it is like when your child is in trouble. Ten years ago this month, on one of those stunning spring days only Washington can offer, my 15-year-old son was arrested. He was leaving the grounds of his private school (where his father and I had transferred him because of discipline issues he had in what we thought was a too-large public high school) when Montgomery County police picked him up for possession of marijuana. Like Fairfax, his school had a zero-

tolerance policy toward drugs, and as a private school, it was under no obligation to retain him. Nonetheless, we appealed -- using many of the arguments offered by opponents of Fairfax's policy: He had learned his lesson, expulsion would be counterproductive, the situation called for the school to be flexible. My son spoke quite movingly, my husband's voice cracked, I sobbed . . . and our son was kicked out.

Turns out, it was not the end of the world, as we had feared. He enrolled in Phoenix

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School, a wonderful alternative program run by the county, where a committed principal and savvy teachers helped him come to grips with his issues. Today, he works as a carpenter; he is engaged to a terrific young woman and has a contract on a house. When I asked how he would feel about me writing about his past difficulties, he told me to go ahead, that he's made his amends and is proud of who he is.

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I don't know what would have happened if the private school had given him the second chance we pleaded for. Likewise, I don't know if what happened to him caused any of his classmates to make smarter choices about drugs. What I do know is that I wasted a lot of time trying to figure out who (a first-grade teacher? his best friend?) or what (my job?) was at fault; finding a reason would make sense of something beyond my reasoning.

Which is why, I suspect, Fairfax's discipline rules -- and not, say, school mental health programs -- are emerging as the possible villain in the death of a troubled young man. They're easy to blame: Who, after all, can argue with the notion that justice is best decided case by case, with all factors considered and without ever overlooking the individual? Yet I sympathize with large systems like Fairfax's that are fighting what must sometimes seem like a losing battle against adolescent drug use. I know how hard it is to prevent drug use by a single child; I can't imagine having to worry about a system with 168,742 children. In giving an inch, do you lose a mile? I know my son was helped by rules and the consequences that come when they are broken.

I also know that efforts to combat teen drug use are not helped by those who -- in my mind, rather naively -- poo-hoo it. When I hear people say it's only to be expected that teens will experiment with drugs, I wish they could hear the story of the mother I met in a parent support group whose 32-year-old son was fighting an addiction she attributed to the drug use she tolerated when he was a teenager. Yes, even this committed mother -- who never abandoned her child, no matter what grief he caused -- couldn't resist the tendency to blame herself.

Josh Anderson left a note: "Why does it have to be like this?" His mother told Fisher that until the day she dies she'll ask herself what she could have done. I suspect that many of the educators who had contact with her son are asking themselves the same question. It's not that easy. And that leaves us all with nothing but despair in confronting the tragedy of a young man's death.

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