

Heavy Metal Music Contributes to Teen Suicide. Raymond Kuntz, Sam Brownback and Joseph Lieberman.

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Heavy Metal Music Contributes to Teen Suicide

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Reprinted from testimony given by Raymond Kuntz before the U.S. Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs, Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, Restructuring, and the District of Columbia, Washington, D.C., November 6, 1997.

Raymond Kuntz's teenage son committed suicide in 1996 while listening to a CD by the heavy metal group Marilyn Manson. Kuntz testified November 6, 1997, on the effects of heavy metal music on teen suicide before the U.S. Senate's Committee on Governmental Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight of Governmental Management, Restructuring, and the District of Columbia. Senator Sam Brownback of Kansas is the subcommittee's chair and Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut is a ranking member of the subcommittee. Both senators are actively involved in investigating the effect of violent lyrics on youth and in encouraging music corporations to take responsibility for those lyrics.

Heavy metal music glorifies death and encourages violence and suicide among teenagers. The offensive lyrics found in heavy metal music contradict community values, harm society, and endanger the nation's children. Music corporation executives should take responsibility for the harm that comes to their impressionable listeners. Furthermore, parental advisory labels should be mandatory on the covers of all violent and offensive music.

For the record, my name is Raymond Kuntz, and our family calls Burlington, North Dakota, home. I have traveled to Washington, D.C., from there today to speak to you all regarding an issue that has changed our lives forever: Violent music's impact on our children.

On the morning of December 12, 1996, as part of our family's normal daily behavior, my wife started our son's shower for him and then went to wake him. But Richard, our son, was not sleeping in his bed. He was dead. He had killed himself. Richard has left us, and he is never coming back.

Please listen to what Richard heard as he died, hear what was in his mind, the lyrics to Marilyn Manson's "The Reflecting God" from the CD titled *Antichrist Superstar*. Your world is an ashtray_We burn and coil like cigarettes_The more you cry your ashes turn to mud_Its the nature of the leeches, the Virgin's feeling cheated_You've only spent a second of you're life_My world is unaffected, there is an exit here_I say it is and then it's

true, there is a dream inside a dream_I'm wide awake the more I sleep_You'll understand when I'm dead_I went to God just to see, and I was looking at me_Saw heaven and hell were lies_When I'm God everyone dies_Scar, can you feel my power?_Shoot here and the world gets smaller_Scar_Scar_Can you feel my power_One shot and the world gets smaller_Let's jump upon the sharp swords_And cut away our smiles_Without the threat of death_There's no reason to live at all_My world is unaffected, there is an exit here_I say it is and then it's true_There is a dream inside a dream_I'm wide awake the more I sleep_You'll understand when I'm dead.

Dear sirs, my son was listening to Marilyn Manson's *Antichrist Superstar* on his stereo when he died—I personally removed that CD with the red lightning bolt on it from his player the next day—with the rough draft of an English class paper about this artist that had been returned to him that very day for final revisions, on the stand next to his body. Richard's friends tell us that in the end this song, "The Reflecting God," from that CD was his favorite song. They say that this song was what he always seemed to be listening to whenever they came over, and the lyrics of that song read as an unequivocally direct inducement to take one's own life.

If you do not believe me, listen to the bridge in the chorus of "The Reflecting God" as performed, not as written in the liner notes: "Each thing I show you is a piece of my death"; "One shot and the world gets smaller"; "Shoot here and the world gets smaller"; "Shoot shoot shoot motherfucker/Shoot shoot shoot motherfucker"; "No salvation, no forgiveness/This is beyond your experience"; "No salvation, no forgiveness, no salvation."

Gentlemen, we are all certainly free to make our own decisions regarding the value of content. But if you were to ask me, I would say that the lyrics to this song contributed directly to my son's death.

Additionally, two of my son's friends, who have been treated for attempted suicide since his death, are and were caught up in Marilyn Manson's fearful, frightening music and are still considered to be at risk.

Sirs, this music, because it glorifies intolerance and hate, and promotes suicide, contradicts all of the community values that people of good will, regardless of faith, ideology, race, economic or social position, share. Simply put, this music hurts us as a people. Our children are quietly being destroyed (dying), by this man's music, by ones and twos in scattered isolation throughout our nation today.

This artist's own words, in his lyrics and interviews, and his actions, indicate that this injury to society is intentional. The predatory world that Brian Warner markets, through his stage persona as Marilyn Manson, is a world no normal person would wish to live in.

Brian Warner's band members have adopted androgynous, two-part stage names, the first part derived from a female celebrity and the second part from a convicted male mass murderer. And Brian got lucky; as the lead, he got to pick "Marilyn" from Marilyn Monroe, the female celebrity who committed suicide, and "Manson" from Charles Manson, mass murderer.

Corporations should be responsible

By their natures, corporations do not have consciences, and it is understandable that MCA would wish to defend a product that entered the Billboard 200 chart at No. 3. But even though they are soulless, corporations do have social obligations and responsibilities.

I understand that the lyrics to individual songs and the content of interviews made by artists with obscure magazines and newsletters are below a CEO's event horizon. But somewhere down the hierarchy line, someone who is aware of both artistic content and stated intent is making corporate economic decisions driven by greed that kill. Corporate decision-making that kills.

Shaming major corporations into more responsible behavior is good. But forcing a corporation to divest itself of a socially unacceptable, still functional subset, possibly at a profit, does nothing to rectify the problem or wash clean the hands of those involved.

From my experience, and based on the fact that you have seen the need to convene this hearing, there is no question in my mind that the damage that this music is doing to our children is a serious problem in our country today.

I believe we need to make the voluntary RIAA [Recording Industry Association of America] parental advisory sticker program mandatory so that parents, moms and dads, can better monitor their children's listening to help keep dangerous materials out of their hands.

From what my family has experienced, this music is a cancer on our society. I have given you my ideas of what we can do to solve this problem and stress that we must act as a people to protect our children from the twin evils of murder and suicide.

Sirs, if there is anything you can do about this problem, my wife, Christine, and I are ready to help you in any way that we can.

Thank you.

Senator Sam Brownback. Thank you, Mr. Kuntz, for your very touching testimony, and thank you for your courage at being here.

I understand that your son, as you stated in your testimony, was doing a paper for his English class on Marilyn Manson?

Mr. Kuntz. Yes, he was.

Senator Brownback. Could you or would you care to share any of the thoughts that your son was writing at that time in that English paper?

Mr. Kuntz. If my son were still alive today, I would say that I believe from the contents of this paper that he was starting to mature, even though it is in a school boy's language, that he was starting to mature intellectually and was beginning to grasp and understand social values that we all share, because the paper addresses these kinds of things. But my son is dead, and I really do not know what to think of this paper.

The English paper

A line from the paper: "His album projects an image of hate towards the Christian community, and the drugs he uses publicly are mind-degrading."

"Throughout his set, he rips and tears at his jagged clothes until naked except for a leather jockstrap. Then he grabs a bottle, breaks it over his head, and invites the crowd to shower him in spit." In a world of AIDS, is that a wise idea?

"Manson's second album *Smells Like Children* is a tribute to two tracks, 'abuse' (part one and two) and 'confusion' which were on the original cut but were ... taken off the album before it was distributed. Manson explains the reason for this in an interview with Rudolf; 'both tracks' featured collaborations done sometime last year with a guy named Tony Wiggins. It involved illegal activities."

My son's closing: "Through the tolerance of 'evil' groups such as Marilyn Manson, many children's minds are being degraded. Marilyn Manson shows that it is possible for a Christian society to produce somebody who is against everything it stands for. Believing that what he is doing is good and promoting it through music, he gains followers by epitomizing children's black thoughts of rebellion."

Senator Brownback. Did you talk with your son's friends about coming here to testify?

Mr. Kuntz. Yes, I did.

Senator Brownback. What did they think about you testifying on your son's suicide?

Mr. Kuntz. Our son's friends have been a great source of comfort for us. They come to our home and visit us. They stop by the store and talk to me. We comfort them; they comfort us. And I have talked to them extensively about this kind of music and what I plan to do. I have asked them if this is proper, if they approve of what I am doing, and part of the reason that I am here today is because they tell me that what I am doing is the right thing to do.

Senator Brownback. How did they respond to this whole ordeal? You mentioned that they came by your store and spoke with you. Right after this happened, how did they respond to the whole ordeal?

Mr. Kuntz. They were horrified and surprised and couldn't understand and terribly hurt. I found out something about our society then. We really do care for each other. We care for

our family; we care for our friends and neighbors. Our children do, too. Nobody wants to experience this kind of loss.

Senator Brownback. Did you know your son was listening to this type of music, Mr. Kuntz?

Mr. Kuntz. Yes, as a matter of fact, I did. I talked to my son as long as—well, it would be three years ago now—about the heavy metal music that he listened to. I didn't care for the liner art. I didn't care for the titles of the songs. I didn't care for the lyrics as I read them. And one day I had a talk with him. He was an aggressive roller-blader, a really athletic boy, and he had a ramp built and some other stuff. And he had symbols on there that I didn't care for, things like swastikas and anarchist symbols and this sort of stuff. And I talked to him about the music and where the symbols were coming from and told him that I didn't want him to use those symbols because I didn't want him to become desensitized by casual exposure to symbols that have a very real, historical association with evil. And he painted them out, and things went on.

And two years ago, when he was 13, we came back from the lake and a camping trip, and he talked to me afterwards, and he said, "Dad," he said, "you know, you don't like some of the music that I listen to, but some of the kids down there were listening to stuff that I found offensive." And I said, "What was that, honey?" And he said, "White Zombie and Marilyn Manson." And I said, "Well, what did you do?" He says, "Well, I took them away and I wouldn't let them listen to them."

Well, sir, I am afraid that he took those albums away from those children and brought them into his own life. I thought my son, when he told me this story, was making headway towards maturity.

Senator Brownback. Have you talked with other parents in North Dakota or your community or around the country that have experienced something similar to what your family has experienced?

Mr. Kuntz. No, not directly. We have had other suicides in the community. Every child who suicides is a different person with a different life, not necessarily associated with this kind of music. There was a suicide four months after my son's death where a young man drove his car off a cliff on the way back from a neighboring community, coming back from some heavy metal concert. I don't know who it was. But as far as talking to parents about it, no, I haven't.

People who have experienced suicide in their lives that are survivors rarely talk to other people. They will occasionally. They will open themselves and talk to somebody who has experienced suicide, but not to the general community. And it is amazing how much there is out there.

Senator Brownback. I hope your testimony will embolden and empower some of those parents to be willing to talk about what has to be a terribly anguishing, just gut-wrenching experience. And I would invite them to contact this Subcommittee if there are others that want to speak out about it. I appreciate your candor and your courage in coming forward.

Senator Lieberman.

Senator Joseph Lieberman. Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Kuntz, I very much appreciate your coming here. I was so struck by your letter when you sent it to me earlier in the year about what you had been through, and it has got to be—it is, obviously, very, very painful to recount this tragedy that you and your family have undergone. And I admire you for having the courage to do it. Each of us who are parents can feel what you are feeling, and it is terrifying. It is a nightmare.

I know your hope is—and I admire you tremendously for this—that it is worth coming forward and telling your story as a warning to other people and to try to help us do something about it, and in a way today to give you the opportunity to speak directly to some of the people in the recording industry, who are good people but are part of producing some terrible music that you have reason to believe helped to end your son's life.

I was thinking, as you were reading from his paper, which was quite eloquent—and I apologize if this seems like a digression; I am going to do it very briefly—but it so movingly speaks to a concern that I think motivates so much of our effort here and the reflections your son had about the contrast between what Marilyn Manson music was doing and religion, in this case Christianity.

I talked about a values vacuum in my testimony. There is a wonderful man named Father Richard Neuhaus who has written a book called *The Naked Public Square*, in which he describes the extent to which we in our country, sometimes for good reasons, have nonetheless pushed out of the public square acceptance and respect of one of the major sources of values and discipline in our culture traditionally, which is religion, beyond constitutional reasons, and that what happens then when the public square is naked is that something else fills it. And too often in our time what is filling it is this abominable culture, music, TV, movies, too much of it giving our kids exactly the wrong message.

Look, we are an imperfect species, human beings. We strive to maintain our stability and to improve ourselves. And the influences on us, whether they set standards and help us conduct our lives, or whether they destroy our ability to do so, have a major impact on how we as individuals and how our overall society goes forward.

And your testimony is just the most stunning evidence of that that I have heard in a long time, quite explicitly—I mean, down to the title of the CD that your son was listening to.

The parents' responsibility

I want to just ask you one or two questions. As you know, a lot of people in the record industry who have spoken out on this problem say, yes, some of this music is awful, but the artists, so-called, have a First Amendment right to have their music produced. And

the real responsibility here is on parents to monitor what music their kids are listening to.

How do you respond to that argument?

Mr. Kuntz. We all have a responsibility to look after our children, not just parents but the political establishment, the churches, the schools, the corporate world, the business community. If we don't look after our children, our society is ultimately not going to make it. It is a joint thing. Nobody is exempt from responsibility here. We all share it.

Senator Lieberman. So parents really can't do it alone.

Mr. Kuntz. It is impossible to do it alone.

Senator Lieberman. Right. I agree. I am from Connecticut so—I have been to North Dakota. Senator Conrad talks to me about it all the time. But some of the perverse behavior that is celebrated in music such as we are focused on today, it has always existed. But traditionally, in the history of the human race, it has been in the shadows. It has been concealed. And part of what has happened in our time is that vile material like this gets produced, gets mass marketed, it is on television; it is in the movies, and your son in Burlington, North Dakota, not in some dark alley in one of America's big cities, gets to tap into the lowest, most degrading aspects of our culture. And it really is part of why—I think you are absolutely right. Parents can't do it themselves, no matter where they live. Nobody is safe. There are no sanctuaries anymore. And that is why we have to go back to the top of the corporations that are producing this and ask the executives to be responsible.

Let me ask one final question that goes to the comment you made about the existing record industry association labeling system. You touched on some of this briefly in response to Senator Brownback. I think you said to Senator Brownback that you knew that your son had Marilyn Manson CDs or albums. Did you know what was on those albums?

Mr. Kuntz. No. I was aware that my son was writing this English class paper on Marilyn Manson. I wasn't aware until then that he was listening to it. We skipped from the incident at the camping to writing this paper about Marilyn Manson, and I thought that he was doing an intellectual, academic exercise. And my little boy, about two weeks before he died, he brought this—he said, "Daddy, come here." He had me come into his bedroom, and he said, "Here, this is the 'Antichrist Superstar' CD that I am doing for my English class paper." And I looked at it, and I looked at the flip side, looked at the liner art, and I looked at the text, and I blew up, told him I didn't want this stuff in my house. And after talking with my wife and my son—and my wife had talked with the English teacher, who I believe was blindsided by the—I don't believe she had any idea whatsoever what the contents of this stuff was. I let it slide.

But I missed an opportunity there. I failed my son as a father. My son came to me and said, "Daddy, Daddy, look what I have." And I failed to recognize that my son was holding a hand grenade and it was live and that it was going to go off in his mind.

I wish to this day that I had been a reasonable and rational person and sat down and gone over the lyrics with him and talked about it and reached out and touched my son, and perhaps what he was doing would have remained an academic exercise.

Senator Lieberman. I understand how you feel, but don't be too hard on yourself. Almost every parent in America in that position would have done exactly what you did because it didn't look like a hand grenade. It looked like a CD. Unfortunately, it was a hand grenade.

I thank you from the bottom of my heart for having the guts to come forward and tell this story. I wish you and your wife and family well. Thank you.

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