

NURGOL'S VOICE:
A TEACHER FACES STUDENT SUICIDE

Kaysie Ellingson

My first week in the classroom, observing silently in the back, I noticed her. Feet swinging from the chair, unable to touch due to her small size, tiny hand gripping her pen and large smile pasted across her face. From the first day Nurgol made me smile with just a glance at her tiny body exuding her rather large personality with a simple shift from one elbow to another. Within a month of working in Golovatsky as a secondary school teacher, Nurgol became my tiny Minnie-me. She made herself known as possibly the worst English speaker in my fifth grade class, but never faltered to attend my English clubs with high hopes of them transitioning into dance clubs. She made me audibly laugh one day in class as she proclaimed proudly that she wanted to be a lawyer. The mental image of her standing firmly in front of the judge, barely being able to see over the bench where he would sit perched listening to each case, floated into my head and expanded my opinion of her assertive presence.

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Every morning as I walked through the white washed hallways of our school, opening into the pool of classrooms where the 5a classroom stood, I would see Nurgol, posted outside of the door. "Hello Miss Kaysie," she would yell to me, extending her clawed hand into the air, waving it with excitement. Twice a week, as I hopped from dirt mound to dirt mound, clenching my coat in the frigid winter air, I would hear the same greeting to my right as Nurgol, with her too-large-for-her-body stride would hustle to my side. She would ask me questions and I would

practice my Kazakh with my smallest student grinning beside me. *This is why I am here*, I would think to myself as we parted. I came to Kazakhstan to prove something to myself (that something, I assumed I would figure out along the way). I fell in love with Kazakhstan when I fell in love with my students.

Eight months into my service, I walked in the doorway to my counterpart's house. Seated at the small table in the kitchen was another teacher. I pulled a chair into the room—a room where we had never conducted work before—and sat down beside the other teacher. Together, the three of us sat in silence. Something was odd.

“Did you hear the bad news,” my counterpart asked me.

“No,” I replied, yet assumed I already knew that my host mother's mother had passed away after a long battle of what I think is stomach cancer.

“Our five a girl, you know, Nurgol? Killed herself.”

My body reacted before my brain could pause the planning of my reaction to the news of my host grandmother. I gasped and cupped my hands over my mouth.

“What. No. Why?”

“She hanged herself on Saturday.”

“Oh my God. No. Why did she do it?”

“I don't know,” my counterpart said, shrugging her shoulders.

The teacher beside me maintained her stance, eyes stuck to her paper. The phone rang and my counterpart turned to answer it. With the moment of absence from gazes, my mind and emotions caught up as tears streamed down my cheeks. Wiping the moisture from my cheeks, my counterpart ended her conversation and turned around locking her gaze on my broken state as if in shock by my reaction.

She took her seat across from me. Here we stood at the cultural crossroads I had dreaded since PST, the differing reactions to suicide—she, baffled by my visible emotional state and me, baffled by her undecipherable emotional state. The rest of the night we sat in choppy silence speckled with obscure jokes about Nurgol and forced lesson planning. My mind couldn't drift from the previous week when I had sat beside her in the park and attempted to talk to her in broken Kazakh as well as the understanding of what was coming: police, interviews and silence.

During PST I had my first introduction to the problem of suicide in Kazakhstan as our group of eleven trainees was faced with two suicides from the ninth form within two months of each

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other. The presence of the police was heavily seen and felt as they stood perched in each hallway, interviewing students, teachers and the director, treating the suicides as something criminal, sniffing out the person responsible. In this situation, from my understanding, the director lost her job. Like my counterpart, our trainers seemed flustered by our reactions to the suicides and seemed uncomfortable talking about it with

us, responding to our questions with, "it doesn't concern us," despite the fact that one of the boys was in one of our trainees' classes. No one had informed her of her student's death until after her lesson when she noticed several of the students were upset. Luckily she didn't take role that day.

As our training came to a much needed end and we gradually were introduced to the places we would live in for the next two years, I began creating check lists in my mind for suicide programs I wanted to start once arriving at site. However, within my first month at site, observing my students and creating a bond with them this checklist floated away. The necessity

didn't seem as urgent in this small community where communication seemed to flow freely and relations between students and teachers appeared to be healthy and filled with trust and love. That would quickly become my biggest regret in my service.

The morning after learning of Nurgol's suicide, I agreed to go with my counterpart to Nurgol's family's house for the "seeing off." The weather that morning was appropriately cliché, misty and gray. Shrouding the village in the mood everyone

felt. I followed behind my counterpart. It was good to have her by my side, like a baby blanket I could cling to for comfort. We walked side by side, leading the way in front of groups of eighth form students and several other teachers. As we walked towards the apartment complex, my class of 5a students filed out of the dirt yard, wiping the tears from the red faces. The tears came. I sucked them back in. *You need to be strong for them.*

I gave myself a shot of emotional morphine and continued towards the front entrance, where there was a tent pitched. Later they would eat food I guessed. I could see the hesitation in my student's body language. My girls grabbed each other's hands, their smiles faded and their pace slowed.

In an inappropriate moment I wished I had my camera to capture such a moving scene. An entire body of students and teachers trekking over to pay their respects to a family in mourning. We were all together. We, at this moment, were one body and one soul that had lost a member. We were all in mourning.

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I allowed my students to go ahead of me as I stayed back, waiting for my counterpart. If there was going to be a moment I needed my security blanket it would be now. We walked towards the doorway, passing by about ten men and boys lined against the wall. I sat back and observed a while before figuring out that these were family members of Nurgol. The sobs escaping from their mouths were what gave me the final indication. I have been taught, through several cultural classes, that men do not shake hands with women. As we made our way past the men I saw my counterpart touching each of them on the shoulder. Out of respect I couldn't bring myself to do it. I couldn't risk breaking a cultural norm at such a tragic moment.

My reservations continued until I found myself in front of the youngest boy, maybe eleven years old, sobbing into his hat. I reached out and touched his shoulder for a moment, I wanted so badly to make everything better for him.

Inside the small apartment, the women from Nurgol's family were lined against the wall. I walked from woman to woman touching their shoulders, shaking their hands and holding eye contact as long as possible to show that I too cared about their lost child. Sometimes in

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Kazakhstan language isn't necessary.

As I had walked to school that morning, preparing myself for the "seeing off" I had convinced myself I wasn't strong enough to endure such a loss. I questioned my return to school next year and gave myself an emotional pat on the back with permission to quit and go home. As the school day came to an end and I passed my smiling, waving students in

the hallways my service became clear. I came to Kazakhstan to prove something to myself. I fell in love with Kazakhstan when I fell in love with my students. I will stay in Kazakhstan because Nurgol's death could have been avoided.

About the author:



Kaysie Ellingson was born and raised in California, the USA. She is currently living in Kazakhstan. During her collegiate career at Concordia University, Irvine, she discovered her passion for writing. After getting involved with her school newspaper, she became obsessed with news media. But before she could settle on a career choice, she felt the urge to challenge herself while helping others.

She applied for the Peace Corps her senior year of college and after graduation moved to Kazakhstan to serve as a secondary English teacher in a small village. Kaysie plans on pursuing her dreams of becoming an international journalist. Aside from writing, her favorite activities are drawing, dancing, reading, graffiti art (on canvas), and traveling. She believes that writing brings the voices of the silenced to the public's attention, which is her primary goal as a writer.