

on the MOVE

Healing from heartbreak

Jason Clementi learned a lot about life this past year as a freshman at college.

His education began when his girlfriend broke up with him, sending him into an emotional tailspin for a good part of the winter.

"I started drinking a lot," said Jason, 19, who attends SUNY College at Fredonia. "I guess I didn't feel like I could go on without her. That was the only thing on my mind."

In addition to getting drunk almost daily, Jason said he didn't sleep very well, either.

"I don't know how many times I sat up, talking to myself, talking to God, talking to the wall," he remarked.

Jason said he didn't start to heal until he began discussing his feelings. Ironically, a big assist came a previous girlfriend, Katie VanHouten. Their high-school relationship of more than two years had ended in early 1998.

"We hadn't talked for a long time, and I guess I needed someone to talk to," Jason said.

"We e-mailed each other and realized we were there for each other, that the friendship was strong enough," said Katie, 19, who recently completed her freshman year at William Smith College in Geneva.

Katie said she supported Jason through his difficult time by helping reinforce his self-esteem. "I listed all the positive things about him," she said.

Jason said he also confided in a girl whom he and Katie had known through youth group at Our Mother of Sorrows Church in Greece. They grew closer as a result, and Jason is now dating that girl.

Michael Theisen, diocesan coordinator of youth ministry, noted

that Jason made the wisest move possible for anyone dealing with heartache: He talked it out.

"You need to know that this happens and is a part of life," Theisen said. "And because it's normal, it's OK to talk about it to adults and peers. I just can't emphasize that enough. If we don't resolve the issues, then the next time we experience a loss it'll be twice as hard — we'll be carrying that much more baggage. You want to enter the next relationship a wiser person."

Heartbroken teens might attempt to relieve their pain through drugs and alcohol, violence or a "rebound" relationship, Theisen said. None

of these solutions really helps the healing process.

"You've got to get it out — preferably with an adult or counselor, or a trusted friend," he said. "The verbalizing of it is the release valve."

In turn, the listener can help out by doing simply that — listening.

"The person doesn't need advice, necessarily. They need to be heard, not fixed or cured," Theisen said.

Theisen also advises the listener to look for "red flags" — talk of suicide or other types of violence. At that point, a parent or guidance counselor should be alerted.

Theisen said that while pain such as Jason's may seem extreme, it's quite normal where heartbreak is concerned — especially for teenagers.

"Their egos are fragile," he said. "Their identities are not fully formed, so their egos are crushed. As you get older, you realize there are others (to date) and this (relationship) is not the sum total of my life."

Based on his experiences, Jason said he's not likely again to let a romance become all-consuming — something that happened both with Katie and the girlfriend with whom he experienced heartbreak earlier this year.

"It's definitely important to have a life, to make time for friends and family," Jason said.

Meanwhile, Katie said she hasn't dated anyone seriously in many months. Although she would like another relationship, she also enjoys her independence.

"It's important to be your own self. Some of my friends, if they don't have a boyfriend or girlfriend,

they don't feel complete. It's something that society places on us," Katie said. "You almost care more about that than your schoolwork."

Jason said he now speaks freely about his experiences through a campus-based group, STEPS (Students Teaching Equals Positive Sexuality). He gives witnesses about sexuality and romance, referring to his own relationships, and is interested in speaking to Rochester-area youth groups as well.

Jason said he advises other teens that breakups are "not the end of the world. That's the biggest thing I've learned."

Yet Jason said he has not always been so open about his feelings. This past winter, in fact, he was reluctant to let people know how badly he was hurting.

"I didn't talk to anybody about anything," he said.

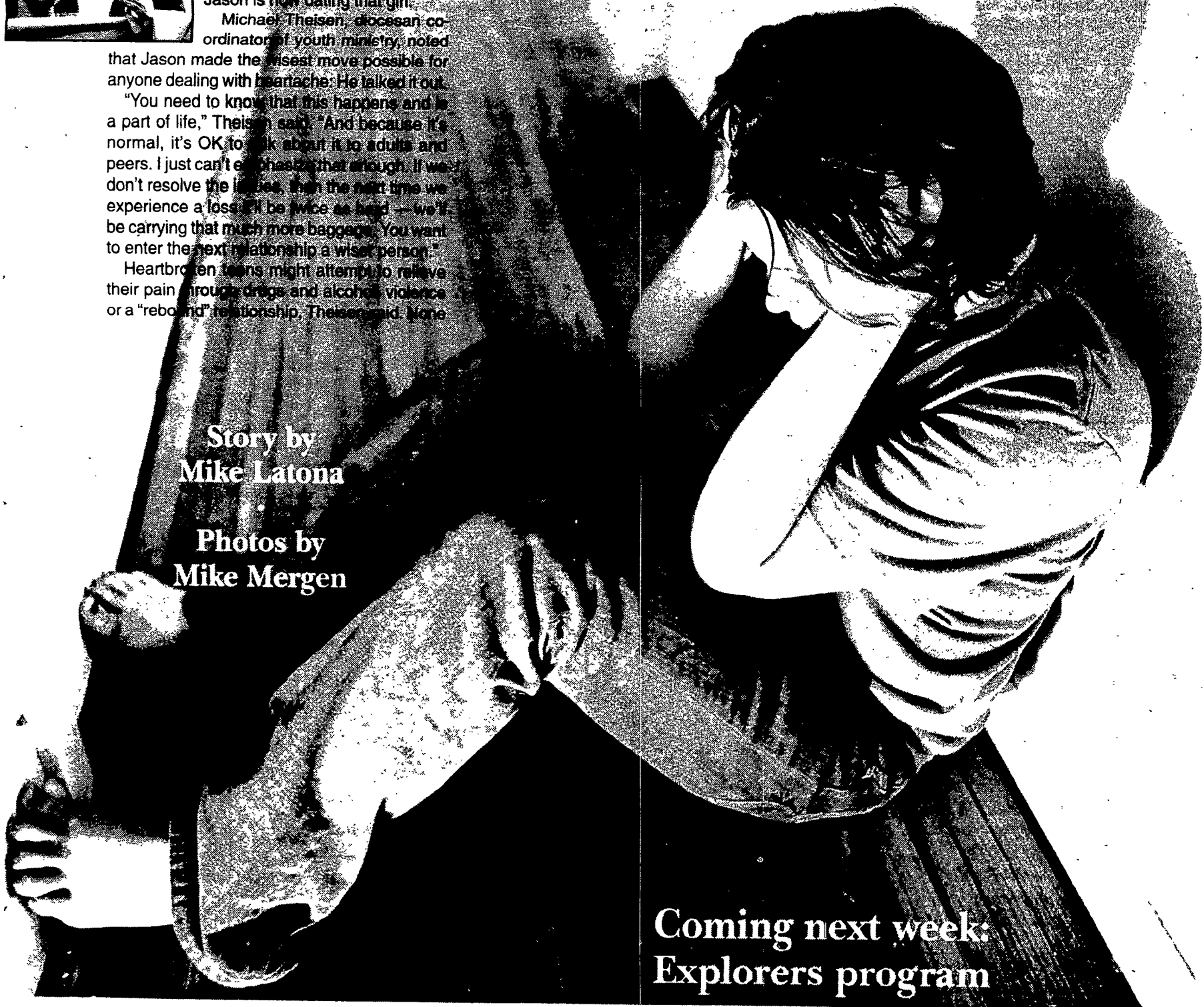
Theisen noted that boys, more than girls, are likely to hold their feelings in. He also thinks it's no coincidence that schoolyard shootings across the country in the past year have all

been committed by boys — and that in several of those instances, the boy was reportedly distraught over a failed romance.

"Males aren't taught how to ventilate and verbalize — in healthy ways. I'm not saying they can't — they're just not taught by culture," Theisen said.

"A lot of boys bottle up their emotions and hold them inside. I don't think that's healthy," Katie said. "I feel boys should be allowed to express their emotion in the same way as girls. It's OK to cry."

Jason agreed: "I think that guys are as sensitive as girls, but a lot of guys might think that they have to be the strong one."



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