

Fighting the tide of youth suicide

Advocates battle stigma that stifles cries for help



Linda McConnell © Special to the News

Alani Casiano, 6, stands in the center of a candlelight creation at Green Mountain Presbyterian Church in Lakewood. The Second Wind Fund - a suicide-prevention group - created the design to represent the 702 teens the organization helped "keep with us."

**By Bill Gallo, Special To The Rocky
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Mary Wiley and Keriba Neveau never saw it coming.

When Wiley's son, David, a University of Colorado junior with a 3.7 grade-point average, committed suicide on July 1, 2002, his parents had no idea he was troubled.

When 15-year-old Josh Gormley, Neveau's son, killed himself on April 25, 2003, he was the sixth Green Mountain High School student to do so in 18 months. But his attentive mother had seen no signs.

Both young men, it appears, fell prey to what suicide prevention activists call "the stigma" - a reluctance to seek help for serious emotional problems that is born of immaturity, fear and the penchant for secret-keeping among adolescents.

Banish the stigma, experts say, and youth suicide will decline dramatically.

Colorado has the sixth highest suicide rate in the nation. It's the second-leading cause of death for people ages 10 to 34, trailing traffic accidents.

Now, public health officials and private prevention programs like Lakewood's pioneering Second Wind Fund are struggling to turn the tide.

Revelation and mystery

Not until Mary Wiley, a human resources director, and her engineer husband, Doug, got a post-funeral look at the alarming Web site their son had created did they start to understand. The site was rife with despair and gloom.

"I know what should have happened with David," Mary Wiley said. "He should have asked for help. Or somebody should have realized he needed it. But nobody had a clue. It was a total surprise to us."

For Keriba Neveau, Josh's death remains a mystery.

"He was going through a bad time in his life and he'd had all these friends who had taken their own lives," she said. "He didn't think his actions through; I'm afraid suicide seemed to him like the thing to do."

Jeff Lamontagne, a former environmental lawyer who founded the Second Wind Fund in the wake of the Green Mountain suicides, says his group has provided free emergency counseling for more than 700 students from 200 Denver-area schools in the last four years, and that "the stigma" may be waning as a result.

"One key difference in suicide in adults vs. kids is that kids often cannot see that life has its ups and downs," he said. "In their first ebb . . . they see it as forever. And that can mean trouble."

Numbers may have dropped recently, he added, but Colorado teenagers are still killing themselves at a rate 40 to 50 percent higher than the U.S. average. Meanwhile, per capita mental health funding in the state ranks 34th in the nation.

The problem isn't lost on Colorado officials. Jarrod Hindman, program manager of the state health department's Office of Suicide Prevention, acknowledges that Colorado's high suicide rate is bad news, but he says his office has made "programmatic progress."

He lauds the efforts of "grass-roots advocates" like Second Wind and is encouraged that the Colorado Trust, an independent grant-making foundation, has allocated \$75,000 to Mental Health America of Colorado to rewrite the state's suicide prevention plan by spring. The plan hasn't been updated since 1998.

Overall, the trust committed \$4.9 million to suicide prevention from 2002 to 2009.

High-profile advocacy

Concern by Colorado first lady Jeannie Ritter also has given the issue a higher profile.

"Her advocacy helps tremendously in education and exposure," Hindman said.

Regis University senior Molly Fortune, who interned this summer for Ritter, saw that up close.

"It's clear that she's committed to making us all aware that mental health is vital to overall health," Fortune said. "Especially for younger people."

To that end, therapists and school officials encourage candor.

Sandy Austin, a student counselor at Green Mountain High School, said she posted an "anonymous tips" box at the school during its plague of suicides, and that eventually led to a change in the emotional climate.

"I remember the day a 16-year-old stood up during a class presentation and said: 'I'd rather have a mad friend than a dead friend.' That was a turning point," Austin said.

Unfortunately, such moments come too late for David Wiley, Josh Gormley and their devastated families.

"David was in extreme pain and he did this to get out of his pain," Mary Wiley said. "What people who commit suicide don't realize, though, is that their pain doesn't disappear with them. It's spread out among their family and friends, and it doesn't go away."

For Keriba Neveau, a paralegal, Josh's suicide was just the beginning of sorrow.

"I soon split up with my husband. My relationships deteriorated. I laid low for three years and feel that I lost everything, literally," she said.

She came out of the darkness thanks to support groups and her own bravery, but she often relives the night her son died.

She recalls looking up at a clock at the scene of her son's final moments:

"If I could just turn the clock back two hours, I thought. I had last seen him two hours before. He was sitting on his bed doing his homework in candlelight.

"I still ask myself: Who blew out the candle?"

Suicide facts

724

Coloradans took their lives in 2006, according to preliminary figures.

- Colorado has the sixth-highest suicide rate in the nation.
- Suicide is the second-leading cause of death for ages 10 to 34.
- Suicide attempts are among the five leading cause of injury hospitalization for people ages 10-64.
- The highest suicide rate in Colorado is among people 85 and older.

FOR HELP

- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** 1-800-273-8255
- **Emergency student counseling:** thesecondwindfund.org
- **Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program:** yellowribbon.org
- **SAFE: TEEN:** safe-teen.com
- **Living Works:** livingworks.net*Sources: State Office Of Suicide Prevention, Second Wind Fund*