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Lives Lost

COPING WITH TEEN SUICIDE



Teen suicide

Averting the tragedy

A teenage death is a tragedy. Regardless of how a teen dies, it's something that shouldn't happen and it affects everyone who knew them – and often many who didn't – deeply.

Young people aren't supposed to die so when they do, whether it's in a car crash or some other type of accident it's shocking and evokes all kinds of emotions, from sadness to anger and beyond.

When a teen dies by suicide, it's all those things and more. The people left behind most often can't understand the reasons why and so along with the sadness there's confusion, feelings of guilt and, in some cases, even embarrassment.

The sad reality is that every year, about 12 teens in Manitoba will die by suicide. That's 12 families devastated by loss, and countless friends and acquaintances left reeling.

Among those are the teen's school family. Everyone from administrators and teachers, fellow students, custodians and bus drivers are impacted by the suicide death of a student. Divisions across the province are working hard to be proactive in a world where teenagers deal with pressures their parents never had.

Judy Dunn will tell you she is well versed – not an authority but well versed – in the reality of suicide. It's a reality she wishes she knew far less about. Her son, Andrew, died by suicide when he was 23, but he'd been battling with suicidal thoughts from at least the age of 15. Judy Dunn fought the battle with him.

"I know more than I ever wanted to," she says, almost 10 years after Andrew's death on Dec. 12, 2006.

She learned of her son's suicidal thoughts when she found a black binder under his bed when she was cleaning his room. She'd already noticed changes in her once happy son's behaviour and reasoned away the changes. He was wearing mostly black clothes, but she figured she liked black clothes too and kids do change in adolescence. But he also had, for the past couple of years, come to dislike holidays

and even his birthday, things that when he was younger he used to get very excited about.

"His tastes seemed to change. He used to love birthdays and Christmas and got very excited about that stuff, and he started calling them Hallmark days."

Dunn said Andrew's thinking became negative and she knew he'd started drinking, not heavily and not all the time, but she said when he did drink, he drank to excess. Though she wasn't thrilled with some of his behaviour, she figured he was just a teenager being a teenager.

But when she found the binder and opened it up she was shocked by its contents and said she could no longer chalk his moods and behaviour up to teenage angst.

"I don't even know for sure what possessed me (to open it), I guess just cause it was under the bed," Dunn said.

The binder contained writings that were "really, really dark", Dunn said, and they left her reeling.

"The fact that he did want to kill himself. Everything that he wrote in it basically saying, you're a loser, you're stupid, everything was negative about himself, the world and the fact he'd be better off dead," Dunn said.

"My heart came up into my throat, I thought I was gonna be sick, and I just thought 'Oh my god, this isn't just an adolescence thing'."

Dunn confronted Andrew, who was angry she'd pried into his personal life and most private thoughts, and from that day forward she worked to try and help her son – to try and save her son.

Andrew did go to a doctor and did begin taking anti-depressant medication but in the years that ensued he would go on and off his meds, Dunn said, and drift in and out of good times and bad. And he became skilled at hiding his true feelings, wearing a mask as Dunn puts it, so that he wouldn't have to answer his mother's and other's questions about his well being.

"The majority of his friends couldn't believe that he was dealing with anything because he

was always there for everyone else, he was always the one making the jokes, he was wearing his mask very, very well and they had no idea that he was in such pain inside," Dunn said.

The night Andrew died he was out with friends and even made a joke about his impending death. Dunn said when a friend asked him how things were going, Andrew replied that he was fine, he was gonna kill himself, but other than that everything was fine. His friends laughed, she said, having no clue that he was serious.

"They just laughed because they thought it was just a joke," she said.

Andrew also phoned a friend that night, a girl, but it was late and she didn't answer her phone. Later she told Dunn how guilt ridden she was, but Dunn said it's not her fault, nor is it the fault of the friends that he'd joked with earlier in the night. They could have no way of knowing, because Andrew hid it so well.

Even his mother thought he was doing well at the time of his death.

"You can't blame yourself, but 99 per cent of the time there's signs, it's whether they're readable signs or noticeable signs. Or if (the person is) joking at the same time, you write it off," Dunn said.

"Again I could see things in him, but not at that time. When he died actually I thought he was doing quite well. I was more concerned with him a few months prior after losing a job that he had really wanted."

Since Andrew's death, Dunn has worked tirelessly to raise awareness of suicide and educate others on what they can do to help. Though Andrew had finished high school when he died, Dunn said it still impacted his former school's staff and students. Almost immediately following his death, Dunn started what would become andrewdunn.org, and through annual walks and other events, they've raised more than \$300,000 that goes towards education, awareness, stigma reduction and various mental health initiatives.

Andrew attended Springfield Collegiate in

the Sunrise School Division, and every year students and staff come to the Andrew Dunn Walk, held the day before Mother's Day at the Oakbank Arena. The school donates their stage and students come and set it up.

Dunn said it's crucial schools do more to teach students about their own mental health, and prepare staff to recognize when students are struggling. She said teachers are "sort of like the first responders in a lot of cases," and making sure they're prepared is absolutely vital.

That's why andrewdunn.org has helped Sunrise fund training so that teachers and students can be made more aware of the signs of someone who's struggling and considering suicide and what they can do to help.

Colleen Boomer is a social worker in Sunrise, and a member of the andrewdunn.org committee, and she said the division deals with suicide and mental illness with proactive and preventative measures but is also prepared to be reactive if necessary.

Boomer has been trained in programs like Tattered Teddies, which tries to identify children aged 5-12 who might be struggling with mental health issues and even feeling suicidal, and Straight Talk, which helps teachers and other staff be aware of warning signs of suicide and give them basic tools to help the student. Boomer trains other staff members to deliver both programs.

She said schools have had to adapt to a changing world, and there's real consideration in today's classrooms of the fact that kids, even very young kids, can grapple with emotions and become overwhelmed by them. Schools now have some form of mindfulness teachings as part of the curriculum in almost every grade.

"Young children, or even teenagers, they're sometimes overwhelmed with feelings and they really don't know what it is and what to do with it and it just keeps happening," Boomer said.

"And it can turn into anxiety, it can turn into depression if we don't teach them, it's normal, we all get those (feelings). You just have to somehow control it."

She agreed with Dunn that giving teachers and other staff the skills to help suicidal students is crucial, and, she said, teachers need to be prepared in case a student suicide becomes their reality.

"We haven't had to deal with a suicide in many years, but just a death alone, it levels all the teachers, and the kids come to school and they count on the teachers to be in charge and cool and handling things...so we support the teachers," Boomer said.

When two Garden City Collegiate students committed suicide within days of each other last June, it sent shock waves through the



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entire province, and Boomer said students and teachers in every division were impacted. Instagram and Twitter told students everywhere about the deaths and while Garden City obviously bore the brunt of the pain, Boomer said all students had fears and emotions they needed to deal with.

Sunrise was delivering a program called Safe Talk to Grade 11 students in Oakbank that day, and the three-hour long program that teaches students about warning signs of a suicidal student, and how to help them out, took on a very real tone. Boomer said she'd already sat in on a few Safe Talk sessions and was impressed with the students' attention and participation, but there was even more engagement that day.

"Maybe that's why they were so talkative," she said. "They didn't want that to happen in their school."

Sunrise, like all schools in the province, has a crisis response team and a policy on how to respond in crisis situations. Boomer

said though there was no official response in her division to last year's suicides, she said everyone was on "hyper alert" mode.

Kelly Schettler, co-ordinator of transition services at MacDonald Youth Services, said they have a mobile crisis unit that can assist if needed, but they have to be called in.

"We don't (go into the schools). School divisions at this point all have really good internal systems for responding at the time of crisis. What our mobile crisis team...does is we offer individual supports to any students or youth who might need it in the aftermath," Schettler said.

Schettler said while everyone is affected in the wake of a suicide, there's additional concern for close friends of the student who died and others who might be struggling with similar issues. She said those teens can react in different ways.

"Sometimes seeing the reality of what (suicide) is like, and what that has done for people, might be the reality check of what

a death is really like,” she said, noting they would still encourage the student to seek help or at least talk about their feelings.

Some students might go the other way and begin comparing themselves to the student who died, and figure if they did it, what’s the point for them, she said. And then there’s the feelings of guilt for not being able to help their friend.

“That’s why schools will have somebody present within the building, within the school available to students, because I think that it’s fair to say that there’s often students who staff might have more concerns about than others. So in the aftermath it’s worthwhile checking in if you’ve got a student that you know has had similar struggles, then you’d certainly want to check in with them, as well as close friends, people that they were in a relationship with, whether it’s a girlfriend, boyfriend or just friendships,” Schettler said.

Schettler said it’s important to let friends know that a suicide death isn’t their fault.

“You try to be reassuring. There’s nothing that anyone could do...it is never anybody’s fault,” she said.

“People might not be ready to accept that yet and so it’s the reassurance of just how absolutely sad that person must have been to have done something that...has no solution, that you can’t go back.”

And while counsellors certainly have their role, Schettler said even in a situation as difficult as suicide, people still want to talk to people they know. It could be a teacher they’ve formed a bond with or a coach they’ve spent a lot of time with. And that’s who should be checking in with the student on an ongoing basis and making sure they’re OK. If after talking, you’re still worried, then you should get professional help.

“We’re more likely to talk to people that we feel safe with,” she said.

“Me as a stranger, just because I know how to ask the questions, doesn’t necessarily make me the best person, because, why should they talk to me? For the person who has that relationship, the message would be ‘I’m really worried about you and I don’t know how to help you right now, but I’m gonna get you the help you need.’”

Schettler said if you are worried someone is suicidal, ask them. A common misconception is that by asking, you’ll put the thought in their head, and she said that’s wrong.

“It couldn’t be further from the truth. It’s my experience that when you ask the question, somebody who is struggling with those feelings will feel very relieved that it’s out in the open and they can actually talk about it.”

“That will not cause somebody to kill themselves.”



YAMIS organizer Loizza Aquino poses with fellow student Noah Martin. Aquino hopes to see more attention paid to mental health in schools.



Taylor Demetriooff, Director of Youth Programming for the Mood Disorders Association of Manitoba, spoke to students about his personal battle with mental health issues and about all the resources available to anyone struggling in their own life.

From tragedy comes peace of mind

Loizza Aquino remembers the day last June when she had to go to school for the first time following her friend's death by suicide.

A memorial was already set up at her school, Vincent Massey, and candles and cards were placed among the students who were sitting there, remembering their friend, Miguel.

She said his death united the students in their grief.

"There was a lot of people just sitting there," Aquino said. "It was all kinds of people because he was friends with so many people. Whether you were popular or not popular, everyone was just sitting there together. It definitely struck a lot of people."

It struck 15-year-old Aquino perhaps harder than most. She gave the eulogy at her friend's funeral and she said they had been friends since she was a young girl. He had been the first person to make her aware of mental illness and the struggle some people have.

But even though he would talk to her and let her know when he was having a hard time, she never saw his death coming, and she has a hard time putting her feelings about it into words.

"I want to say (it's) tragic, but I don't think it really suits it. I just think that it was...I really don't know what word to use 'cause everyone was so shook by it, because no one saw it coming. He came to school the day before, talked to the same people, hung out with the same people, smiled at everyone, said the same things and did the same things he would have done. It was fine," she said.

"Then we said bye to each other at the end of the day, and that was it."

Aquino and a group of students from other Winnipeg high schools formed Peace of Mind 204 and a couple of months before Miguel's death, they were already working on YAMIS – Youth Against Mental Illness Stigma. His death put even more meaning behind the task at hand.

The 11 students who hail from Vincent Massey, Kelvin, Garden City, West Kildonan, Sturgeon Heights, St. Paul's and Churchill and make up Peace of Mind 204, want to remove the stigma from mental illness, and make everyone – those who suffer from mental health issues especially, but also others who don't – realize that there's no shame in asking for help.

"(The main point) is definitely to talk about it," Aquino said. A former MTS Young Humanitarian winner who fundraised for a school in Kenya, raised funds for typhoon victims in the Philippines, and distributed

"It was pretty unexpected, no warning signs whatsoever. He never really told me anything (at that time) even though he always told me if something was going on."

She said teenagers are under an incredible amount of pressure these days, often juggling school and jobs and working hard to be accepted by their peers and to find self worth. She said being cool or popular is hard in today's world, because "being yourself isn't cool anymore".

She thinks the stigma that surrounds mental illness kept Miguel from seeking out help. She said students don't want to admit

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anti-bullying Day of Pink t-shirts for newcomers to her school, Aquino has a history of encouraging young people to talk about their issues.

"You can't get help if no one knows you need it."

YAMIS took place at the Manitoba Theatre for Young People last month, and it brought together speakers and performers with the aim of getting people to realize the stigma that continues to surround mental illness is killing people.

Aquino said her friend, who was two years older than her, was skilled at hiding his problems, and she said she doubts others at their school had any idea he was struggling.

"Not many people knew how he was feeling. He was always...the type of guy to always smile, always tell you to have a good day, always tell you to have a good night, ask how you are...and always smiling," she said.

they can't keep up in math class, never mind admitting they're depressed.

"That's a lot of it. Especially because, you know, you're a guy, you're in Grade 12, you should be able to overcome any obstacles in your life, you need to be tough, you need to be strong," she said.

"People are afraid to be judged, to be thought of as a weak person."

Aquino said with Peace of Mind, they hope to appeal to their own age group to start accepting others for who and what they are and they also want the adults in their lives to take teenagers' concerns more seriously.

"Something I hear a lot is, 'oh, you're a teenager, what do you have to worry about?' And that makes me cringe every time."

Follow Aquino on Twitter @loizzaaquino and on her blog at loizzaaquino.blogspot.com.