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Talk of suicide tough, but vital to hear

Organization formed after teen's death

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It's Ken Meyers' second presentation of the morning, on a mission born of unspeakable tragedy. The 15-year-olds, about 80 of them, file in the room at Glenbrook South High School, talking and laughing. Meyers warns the students they may feel uncomfortable. They may even want to leave the room.

He reaches for the enlarged photo perched on an easel. She is beautiful, this young girl. She is on a beach, the sun hitting her. She is smiling. He tells the group her name is Elyssa. He asks them to think of her as their best friend.

The students quickly learn that on the morning of Feb. 11, 2004, Elyssa Meyers, a 16-year-old sophomore at New Trier High School, hanged herself in her Northfield home. They learn too that she had suffered from depression.

After Elyssa's death, her uncle and mother, Ken and Joanne Meyers, began volunteering at Links-North Shore Youth Health Service, telling their story to others. But they broke away in June 2006 to form Elyssa's Mission with close family friends. The private, non-profit organization set out to teach teens about the warning signs of depression and suicide.

Now, their brutally honest message has earned a spot on the curriculum of several middle and high schools on the North Shore. And with the latest statistics verifying a disturbing increase in suicide among teenage girls, experts said, the program is sorely needed.

A study released in September by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention showed that after a steady decline for 14 years, the suicide rate rose 8 percent for girls and young women ages 10 to 24 from 2003 to 2004. Among girls 10 to 14, the rate increased 75.9 percent.

"The increase is a great concern for us," said Keri Lubell, behavioral scientist in the CDC's injury center. "Especially because...there are several groups, like [10-to 14-year-old girls], where the rate increased much more markedly."

The study also found a 32 percent increase in suicide among girls 15 to 19 and a 9 percent increase in boys ages 15 to 19.

"We need to be looking at broad suicide-prevention measures that can help us stop suicidal behavior long before it causes a fatality," Lubell said.

Four months after Elyssa's death, Erika Neuckranz, 14, an 8th grader at Washburne Middle School in Winnetka, committed suicide after a yearlong struggle with depression.

Hearing about that and several other teen suicides on the North Shore reinforced the need to talk openly about depression and suicide and provided the impetus to launch their mission, the Meyerses said.

"Our message is to destigmatize suicide," Joanne Meyers said. "And to let people know that depression can kill."

Turning point

"Erika and Elyssa's death were a turning point in this community," said Tom Golebiewski, head of social work at New Trier High School. "There is a deep stigma attached to mental illness that is still pervasive in our society. The work of Elyssa's Mission and Erika's Lighthouse [a group that also addresses depression issues] has become an active force to courageously, actively address these issues."

Golebiewski said it is important to realize that other psychological issues such as drug and alcohol abuse and self-mutilation often mask depression. Eating issues, harassment and bullying are often warning signs.

Elyssa's Mission instructors have reached about 7,000 students at schools including Glenbrook South, New Trier, Loyola Academy in Wilmette, Deer Path Middle School in Lake Forest, Caruso Middle School in Deerfield and Choir Academy in Chicago.

The group now plans to take its message to parents, with suicide-awareness classes beginning at Glenbrook South in Glenview.

"Our goal now is to establish more of an alliance or relationship with schools, to maximize our impact," Ken Meyers said. "Not just to teach and leave, but to work with the parents, teachers, social workers and health workers."

At Loyola Academy, Elyssa's Mission was presented for its second year. Debra Larrea, guidance counselor, said students pay close attention.

"I am amazed by the number of young junior boys, athletic boys, who come in after and

tell me that they are depressed," Larrea said.

Ken Meyers said he clearly remembers a program last year at Niles West High School in Skokie.

"One girl sat through the whole thing holding her girlfriend's hand," Meyers said. "Afterward, the school social worker told me they were holding hands because one of the girls had the same warning signs we were talking about. The counselor said we saved her life."

Just recently, Liz DeSimon, a youth ministry counselor with St. Peter Damian Catholic Church in Bartlett contacted Elyssa's Mission to arrange a communitywide presentation in January. There have been nine teen suicides in the Bartlett-South Elgin area in the last 18 months.

"The kids have come to me and asked what to do, who will be next," DeSimon said. "There is confusion and anxiety. We want the parents to know the warning signs and to help the kids heal."

Ken Meyers has learned a lot since he first started the program. In the beginning, students would ask how Elyssa killed herself.

"I wouldn't tell. I would gloss over it," Meyers said. "Part of it was about me and protecting my family.

"But when you realize the impact you have with others, it gives you the confidence. Now when they ask, I tell them," he said.

One of the Mission teachers is Jeanne Malnati, a clinical social worker. Her daughter was one of Elyssa's best friends. She knew of Elyssa's problems and, in retrospect, wishes she had done more.

In her freshman year of high school, Elyssa was struggling with depression and had spent part of the year at a private school but returned to New Trier.

"I was working at New Trier and walking in the hall and heard this loud, wonderful 'Mrs. Malnati! I'm baaaack!' And it was like this new kid with a new beginning. I was so happy for her.

"But the next time I saw her, she was slumped in the fetal position in a chair in the social worker's office. That was the last time I saw Elyssa," she said.

Victim of bullying

Malnati, like the other Mission teachers, doesn't mince words. Elyssa had been the subject of bullying at New Trier. One student came to see Malnati, sobbing. He had been paid \$10 to tell Elyssa that everyone hated her.

"The bullying stories about Elyssa are heartbreaking," she said. "But telling the stories to the kids -- they get it."

The mission's Web site is <http://www.elyssasmision.org> . The Centers for Disease Control's Injury Center also recommends a national suicide-prevention lifeline that links to local crisis centers as well as other resources at 800-273-TALK.

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