

Teens turn grief into mission, launching suicide awareness campaign

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Woodstock, Conn. —

For Woodstock Academy students Shaylan Putney, Shevaun Reddy and Alex Warner, it isn't statistics that show how serious youth suicide is: It's personal experience.

All three have lost loved ones to youth suicide, and the pain has driven them to start a Suicide Prevention Committee at the school.

"We all have a reason to be here," Putney, 15, of Pomfret said. "It's a way for them not to die in vain."

Putney said her 15-year-old cousin from Texas committed suicide in October 2007.

"It really hurt," Putney said. "She was an amazing person."

The committee hosted a Suicide Prevention Forum Thursday at the school that drew about 50 people from surrounding towns. They discussed local resources and areas of need and developed an action plan, which included training in schools and printing brochures to help prevent suicide in northeastern Connecticut.

The school will host another forum in May to discuss progress.

Suicide is the second-leading cause of death among teens 15-19 years old and young adults 20-25 years old in the state, according to the Connecticut Youth Service Advisory Board.

A 2005 Connecticut School Health Survey reported 15.1 percent of high school students in Connecticut had considered attempting suicide in the last year, compared with 16.9 percent nationwide.

But the survey also reported 12.1 percent of Connecticut high school students actually attempted suicide one or more times in the past year, compared with only 8.4 percent nationwide, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Martha Harrison, Youth Prevention Director for United Services, said awareness is the biggest obstacle.

“There’s almost this misnomer that if you talk about it, it’s going to happen more, and conversely, if you don’t talk about it, it’s going to go away,” Harrison said. “It’s not going away.”

State Senate President Pro Tempore Donald Williams, D-Brooklyn, attended the forum and acknowledged “there’s a significant teen suicide problem in the U.S.”

“Sometimes as we become adults, it’s difficult to remember all the stress and issues (of being a teen),” he said. “There’s a lot of pressure.”

Putney said the goal is to bring attention to the issue.

Warner, 15, of Pomfret, lost her brother, Josh, 17, to suicide in December 2007. Warner said now that she knows the warning signs of suicide, she recognizes them in her brother’s behavior, and wants to raise awareness in others.

Reddy said she wants the silence around suicide to end. She said her uncle committed suicide at 23 and she has seen the effect on her family.

All three said the loss of loved ones motivates them to work toward prevention.

“Obviously, we’re a small group of people in a small state,” Putney said. “But it’s a start.”

Where to call

Connecticut Youth Suicide Advisory Board suicide hotline: (800) 273-TALK (8255)

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