

Napa Valley *Register*

Let's talk about suicide: Napa County Suicide Prevention Council launches awareness campaign

 napavalleyregister.com/news/local/let-s-talk-about-suicide-napa-county-suicide-prevention-council/article_e68e7879-fae8-5cb1-b465-70e0c5e23aeb.html

May 25, 2018



Denise Bleuel, right, and Jim Warnock joined the Napa County Suicide Prevention Council to help reduce the stigma surrounding suicide, spread awareness and help prevent other families from losing their loved ones through suicide. Bleuel's son, Quoyah, died by suicide Dec. 10, 2015. He was 37 years old.

J.L. Sousa, Register

Nine people have died by suicide in Napa County so far this year. Last year, there were 18 deaths by suicide. Between January 2000 and June 2017, 245 people died by suicide, according to county officials.

In 2016, two of those people were only teenagers – one a student at Redwood Middle School, the other attended Vintage High School. Out of their deaths came discussions –

discussions about what parents could do, what professionals could, and what the community could do to see the signs and potentially save people, to prevent suicide.

Aldea's Courage Village was formed, Teens Connect was formed and, finally, toward the end of 2017, the Napa County's Suicide Prevention Council was formed. These groups, along with others in the county, are working together to spread awareness, to end the stigma around suicide, and prevent more deaths. The council has been meeting since November and has already started launching projects. Their first awareness campaign, which is focused on anti-stigma messaging, was launched Monday.



A pen and ink self-portrait drawing that Denise Bleuel's son, Quoyah, drew in 1996. Bleuel and her husband Jim Warnock joined the Napa County Suicide Prevention Council to help reduce the stigma surrounding suicide, spread awareness and help prevent other families from losing their loved ones through suicide. Bleuel's son, Quoyah, died by suicide Dec. 10, 2015. He was 37 years old. J.L. Sousa, Register

Denise Bleuel, a retired clinical social worker, and her husband, Rev. Jim Warnock, are part of this council. They lost their son, Quoyah, to suicide on Dec. 10, 2015. He was 37 years old.

"My son, Quoyah, was a brilliant, kind, handsome and enormously creative man," Bleuel said. He loved the outdoors, fishing, and gardening. He was an artist. But he also had a mental illness.

"He was a really special man," Warnock, Quoyah's stepfather, said. "I loved him, I love him still. My heart is just heavy."

"He shouldn't be dead," he said. "He felt hopeless – he just got into this dark, dark place."

Although he had a good upbringing, a loving family and financial support, Quoyah still struggled everyday with his illness. He felt like he had nothing – no job, no money, no friends, no girlfriend, no prospects.

Before he died, he called his mom. It was 3:15 a.m. and neither Bleuel nor Warnock heard the call. Bleuel said she still doesn't know whether he was calling to say goodbye or if he was reaching out for help.

The first year after her son's death was hard, but the second was even more difficult, Bleuel said.

"I think it was the hardest because people forget," she said. "They go on with their lives and you don't forget. It's with you every day."



Denise Bleuel's son, Quoyah, died by suicide Dec. 10, 2015. He was 37 years old. He is seen in a pair of photographs and a sculpture that he created. J.L. Sousa, Register

Bleuel chose to talk about her son and her loss every chance she had – from workers at her house on Main Street to people she encountered at the grocery store.

“When I talk to people, it seems like everybody has a family member that’s got a mental illness or a drug problem,” she said. “When you start talking about it, it’s like ‘OK, we don’t have to be embarrassed, we can talk about our loved one too’ and then we don’t feel so isolated. So now we can figure out where to get help, what to do about it.”

Suicide isn’t something most people want to talk about, Warnock said. It’s something they avoid, he said, as is mental illness.

“People need to hear it,” he said. “People need to hear it that you’re hurting. It doesn’t do people good to just kind of ignore and gloss over things.”

“When you share your pain with somebody else, there’s a connection,” he said. “If everybody’s protecting themselves and protecting other people, nobody really gets a chance to connect.”

Getting people to talk about suicide is one of the reasons Bleuel and Warnock joined the Suicide Prevention Council.

“We need to talk about it because awareness helps people identify it in others, in ourselves and takes away the fear and shame that can be associated with suicidality,” said Mental Health Director Bill Carter of the Napa County Health & Human Services Agency. Although we fear it, it’s like getting any other illness, he said.

“This group has been very active and taken a lot of initiative,” Carter said. “Our goal is to support all of the entities in town that are dedicated to reducing suicides.”

Part of this countywide, systematic approach will include researching suicide in the county, spreading awareness, promoting a streamlined screening process, and providing training.

“Education will lower the risk of suicide in our community,” said Michele Farhat, director of development at Aldea Children & Family Services. When confronted with talk of suicide, she said, people may shut down for fear of encouraging suicidal thoughts in the person, but the opposite is true, experts said. Talking to someone about suicide – asking them about their feelings – won’t encourage suicide. Instead, she said, it will reduce the risk of them following through with it.

Aldea, which serves individuals with mental health challenges and adults with developmental disabilities, began Courage Village in response to two student deaths in 2016. Courage Village seeks to work with the community to minimize the stigma associated with asking for help.

Farhat said that the Suicide Prevention Council is a “nice platform” to bring the community together to work towards that same goal – to minimize the stigma associated with feeling suicidal as well as being the loved ones left behind by suicide. To the families left behind, she said, it might feel shameful, leaving them to suffer in silence.

Jeni Olsen started Teens Connect also in response to the student deaths. The organization

seeks to support and empower teens through programs centered around art, wellness, peer support and volunteering.

Her goal is to support their emotional and social well-being.

“I think that every teen in Napa was affected even if they didn’t know them (the teens who died by suicide in 2016) personal,” Olsen said. After that Olsen, who has two young adult sons, wanted to find out what teens were going through and what kind of support they were in need of.

Twenty-five percent of seventh graders reported experiencing “chronic sadness/hopelessness” in the past year, according to Napa County’s 2017-2018 report of the California Healthy Kids Survey. For ninth graders, it’s 30 percent. For high school juniors, it’s 40 percent. Eighteen high school juniors reported they had considered suicide.

Through her work with Teens Connect, Olsen learned that teens are feeling a lot of pressure at school. They feel like they aren’t good enough, they are comparing themselves to others via social media, and they are trying to be perfect students, athletes, and college applicants.

“Teens have become perfectionists because the demands society puts on them,” Olsen said. And, she said, they are crumbling under the pressure.


“It really shook me because I realized they were struggling with depression and anxiety and they weren’t talking about it,” she said. They don’t feel like there is anyone to talk about it with, she added.

Napa resident Heather Bailie said that she joined the council because she has seen too many people suffer.

“It’s a cause that’s just really close to my heart,” she said. “I’ve had friends wither try suicide or complete suicide.” In Napa County, she said, there are incidents pretty frequently.

“Suicide isn’t an easy issue, there’s a lot of things that factor into it,” Baillie said. When she worked as a restaurant manager in Napa, she said she encountered a lot of people struggling with mental illness, depression, anxiety and substance abuse. She knew how to intervene, but many people don’t, she said. That’s why training employers and community members about how to react to someone exhibiting the signs of suicidal behavior is so important, because it can save lives.

“Let’s not blame anybody,” she said. “Let’s ask what we can do to help them, what we can do to change this.”

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