



In wake of suicide, struggling for answers

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GHS

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Needham — Though residents just began grieving the loss of 17-year-old Kyle Shapiro, a Needham High School student who took his own life last Monday, they also turned a watchful eye toward the future. His death marks Needham's fourth teenage suicide in less than a year and a half, a startling number to parents and students alike.

"Sometimes you can't see an end to suffering, but there's this barrier between life and death," said Dr. Mark Schechter, a Needham resident. "But when you see other kids doing it, it makes it a little easier to get through that barrier, and maybe even a little bit glamorous. We need to show them that it's not Sylvia Plath or River Phoenix."

Hofstra University freshman and Needham High graduate Gregory Gatto, 19, took his own life in November 2004, on the same day that Pollard Middle School student Young-Chul Hong, 13, did the same. In October 2005, Needham High student Asya Leykin, 17, became the third student in a year's span to commit suicide.

Schechter, chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at North Shore Medical Center, helped facilitate a forum on suicide last Thursday. The Needham Clergy Association sponsored the forum, which gave residents an opportunity to publicly air their concerns and brainstorm preventative measures. A few hundred residents congregated at Temple Beth Shalom, where parents and students, separately, shared their feelings.

"We wanted to gather together in a safe and meaningful place, to somehow try to find words when words fail us," Rabbi Jay Perlman of Temple Beth Shalom said.

Counselors from Samaritans, a teen-focused subset of Samaritans; Needham High Principal Paul Richards; Youth Commission Director Jon Mattleman; and additional members of the clergy association lent their expertise to the event.

"The students have been absolutely awesome in supporting each other, but whenever this happens, it brings up a lot of issues and a lot of fatigue," Richards said. "You can probably see it in my face. While we were all together - there's no doubt about that - we don't have any answers, and no one said anything Tuesday. We all knew what each other was thinking, but we were just too tired to say it."

Two freshman boys in attendance said teachers and administrators at the high school discussed Shapiro's death with them last Tuesday, but by last Wednesday, the chatter was solely among friends.

"People aren't dealing well at all. It's pretty quiet at school," one of the boys said, asking not to be named. "Kyle was a great kid; a lot of us were friends with his brother."

There isn't any peer counseling program in place at the high school, according to Richards, but that hasn't stopped students from unofficially turning to their friends and classmates for support. Shapiro's death, however, might prompt one at the school.

Rev. John Buehrens, minister at First Parish in Needham Unitarian-Universalist and president of the Clergy Association, agreed that Shapiro's death must serve as a wake-up call.

"There's a word in your tradition, teshuva, which means turning," Buehrens said, voice cracking. "Up to this point, our community has been reactive to the tragic decisions of our youth. Tonight, I hope this is a turning, where we organize ourselves to say 'no more.'"

Parents broke off into a separate group from kids, and voiced questions on a variety of topics, including how long their children should grieve for Shapiro or whether to force children to discuss it or wait for the children to come to them. Much to their dismay, there were no straightforward answers to their questions, just discussion.

"It's just incredible that kids of this age have to live through so many suicides," Schechter said. "A lot of it is about the mass hysteria we can all get into, and we don't always realize some of the pressure we put on them."

One parent suggested that in a wealthy and well-educated community like Needham, kids are pressured to do as well or better than their parents, a difficult goal to attain. When your parents have a bachelor's and a master's degree, he said, it becomes pretty hard to beat them. But if you're a kid in Indiana whose parents only got to the eighth grade, you don't feel the same pressure, he said.

Another parent said the answer was in praising students for their accomplishments, not just their criticizing their failures.

Other parents continued to urge their peers on, saying for these four completed suicides, many more are attempted.

"A lot more help and attention can be given to them while they are alive," the mother said. "Living hurts when you are a kid, and I think we all forget that. I'm surprised there aren't more suicides."

Mattleman bolstered her idea with numbers from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. The results of the survey, which is

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completed every two years, indicated 11 percent of the student body considered suicide; 8 percent conceived a plan for suicide; and 4 percent attempted it in the past year.

"The example I always use is that if 50 kids had diarrhea, we'd close the school down and call it a health crisis," Mattleman added.

Richards also expressed concerned with the numbers.

"Kids are starting to say things like, 'There's something wrong with Needham. Are we cursed?' which is disturbing," Richards said. "But remember, it's not just about drug use, it's not just about too much homework. Let's not rush to put a simple answer on it."

But after all the talk, the mother of a freshman who was hospitalized for depression tried to stir the audience to more than just discussion. She proposed the creation of a task force to include students, parents, police, school administrators, clergy and other town departments, which would work together toward preventing suicide. She was cheered on by other parents when she asked that the task force begin that night.

Despite parents' support for one another's statements, especially the idea of a task force, no plans came to fruition.


Buehrens called the situation a "spiritual challenge" for the town, which will continue. Likewise, Mattleman asked parents to come forward and bring their stories and suggestions to him.

"We're the experts, but you guys are the experts on your kids," he said.

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