

Oxford suicides bring national problem home

BY PAT MURPHY
STAFF WRITER

When Kerry Allen returns home from work every day, she makes a point of talking with her daughter Elizabeth.

"I listen carefully," Allen said. "I take everything she says very seriously."

She has always tried to pay attention to her daughter, said Allen, and not just because Elizabeth, now 14, is athletic and gets good grades — honored as a student of the month at Oxford Middle School in January.

"I want Elizabeth to know she's special," said Allen, a single parent. "She's always been important to me."

Letting youngsters know they're special has become something of a civic and moral duty in the Oxford-Lake Orion area as the communities attempt to deal with three teenage suicides — all by hanging — within a nine-month period.

The latest death was that of Joshua Brouhard, 18, who died Jan. 24 in a wooded area near Davis Lake.

Equally alarming, according to school counselors and others, is the number of teens who have admitted to attempts at harming themselves.

The communities realize there's a problem, according to Patrick Breen, Orion area youth assistance worker. And there's a concerted effort to alert parents and teenagers alike.

Part of sounding the alarm, Breen said, involves a basic message to parents: "Let your youngster know you care. Take the time to let them know they're special."

But that message should resonate anywhere there are children, according to psychiatrist Jeffrey A. London, associate medical director at Havenwyck Hospital in Auburn Hills. Cluster suicides — several similar deaths in a specific area in a relatively short period of time — can happen anywhere, he said.

Havenwyck deals with adolescent suicides — or attempts — on a regular basis, London said. They know teenage suicides can happen anywhere at any time — regardless of educational, economic or social status.

"When people (especially young people) lose hope," said London, relatively routine problems — a fight with parents, trouble at school, breaking up with a girlfriend or boyfriend — might trigger a suicidal response.

Intervention isn't simple, said the psychiatrist. But parents should consider it a serious obligation.

"Parents have to take time to listen to their children," he said. "And they've got to offer some reasonable hope."

"Parents have to say, 'I hear you, and I realize how badly you must feel,'" London said, "and parents must assure the youngster they'll do whatever it takes to ease the hurt."

Kalman J. Kaplan, professor of psychology at Wayne State University and a research associate in psychiatry at Michael Reese Hospital in Chicago, believes there are things common to most suicides — including, possibly, the physician assisted suicides linked to Dr. Jack Kevorkian.

"There's a loss of meaning in life," said Kaplan. For older people, it might be triggered by deteriorating health accompanied by the deaths of friends and loved ones. For middle age people, the loss of meaning may be associated with the loss of a job or a feeling of stagnation.

"In young people, it involves a struggle with identity," said Kaplan.

Such feelings are powerful, warned Kaplan, and not easily dispelled. Above all, he said, "parents must let their youngsters know they love them unconditionally."

Whatever the causes, regardless of the contributing factors, the Oxford and Lake Orion communities are determined to face them head on, according to Oxford Schools Superintendent Marion Ginopolis. "This problem isn't a school problem," she emphasized, "it's a community problem."

The schools have expanded counseling efforts and the community has formed a task force to bring adults, parents and youngsters together. "We had 30 students attend a subcommittee meeting Thursday (Jan. 30, the day Joshua Brouhard was buried).

"They opened up about the pressures they face daily — pressure from school, the family, drugs, alcohol and sex. It's exciting to see these young people become part of the solution," said the superintendent.

The solution isn't easy, according to experts. Hap-hearted attempts don't work, and failure has a heavy price.

But the solution involves a massive education program, according to child welfare worker Patrick Breen. "We had some experts come in to talk with counselors and teachers," he said. The idea was to learn the correct approach, then get the message out.

For one thing, Breen said, counselors and others were encouraged to explore — and expose — common myths about suicide. For example:

- Myth — "People who talk about suicide, or threaten to do it, don't really mean it. Fact — Talk of suicide is a call for help, to be taken

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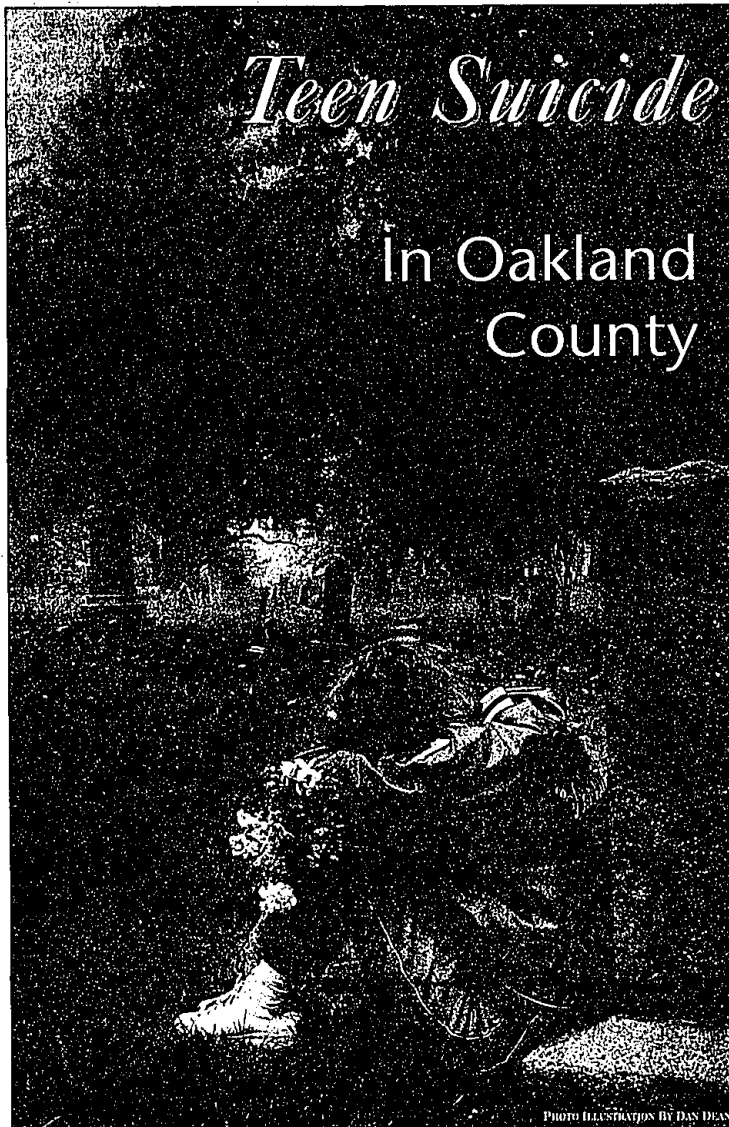


PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY DAN DEAN

Rabbi offering 'Hope' to teens, parents as a suicide antidote

BY TIM SMITH
STAFF WRITER

Michael Syme learned to play classical violin in a month. He even played guitar with John Lennon.

But the talented young musician was depressed. He called out for help to his brother one afternoon. That night in 1975, Michael died — sitting in a closed car, exhaust fumes choking the life out of his 21-year-old body.

"He was an extraordinary young man," said the brother, Temple Beth El Rabbi Daniel Syme, who in 1984 began his crusade on a national level in conjunction with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

"I promised myself when he died that I would do whatever I could possibly do to save other families the pain of this senseless tragedy," he said.

Many other family members today feel the pain, wondering if they could have intervened and made a difference. Syme said 600,000 to 800,000 youths — incredible as it may seem, as young as 5 — try suicide every year. More than 6,000 succeed.

For them, life equals loneliness, broken

families and unrelenting pressure. Death offers something that is romanticized on TV, in movies and music.

Declaring war on suicide

So, Syme has concocted an antidote. Reach For Hope is a pilot program he's teaching at Beth El, located in Bloomfield Township, currently open just to congregational members. (Separate sessions are underway for those in grades 9-12 and adults.)

But the rabbi and others there envision expanding the program within a year to Oakland County high schools and other community groups.

The first to complete the program received certificates and were treated to a concert by Peter Yarrow of the legendary folk group, Peter, Paul & Mary.

In fact, with Reach For Hope, Syme intends to "declare war on youth suicide. I want to eliminate those words from the vocabulary of the (metro) Detroit commu-

nity."

"I tell kids that once you're dead, you're dead. Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Suicidal thoughts can pass with time. But kids don't have the experience that those thoughts pass. So you have to help them along."

Syme said the eventual goal with Reach For Hope is that more and more will take the six-week course, learn how to detect warning signs and collect new insight on how to reverse a tragedy-in-the-making.

Meanwhile, Reach For Hope will strive to take a shot at another troubling target. Syme said at-risk youths often cry out to peers about their situations, even that they plan on killing themselves, only to insist their confidantes not let anyone else in on the secret.

Reach For Hope graduates will learn that it's OK to "crack the wall of silence," Syme said. And for them to seek out a compassionate third party.

"It's OK to break a confidence when it deals with life and death," Syme said. "I know the consequences of silence. I was with my brother the day he died. For all intents and purposes, he told me he was going to kill himself ..."

"I then made a mistake that I'm determined kids won't make today. I wrote off his comments as an attempt to get attention — a sort of dramatic statement. And that very night he took his life."

Reach For Hope also will lend guidance. If somebody talks suicide, grads are to ask a simple "how?"

A specific answer triggers red flags. In such cases, explained Syme, "we teach kids not to leave their friends," and subsequently phone an adult who knows exactly what to do in such situations.

Joyce Seglin, congregational educator at Temple Beth El, said that as Reach For Hope gains momentum, a list will be developed containing names and phone numbers of "adults they can trust. And those adults have to be clearly identified. A member of the clergy, a guidance instructor, a teacher. Even the guy who owns a baseball card shop."

Mental gun detectors

According to Seglin, urban schools are equipped with metal detectors. "But we need intellectual gun detectors in all our schools." That means people who can spot a potential suicide, and successfully intervene.

In Reach For Hope, Syme and class participants delve into the "pathology" of suicide, about the reasons it has tripled or quadrupled since the 1950s.

"We discuss the things to say and the things not to say," the rabbi explained. "One of the common things people say is 'Don't worry,' or 'That's silly.'"

It's clearly not. Support systems also are smaller for increasingly lonely teens. Another major factor to the rise in suicide. Immediate families aren't as large; extended family members live further away. There aren't as many kids around the neighborhood to play, vent and talk with.

"When I was growing up in Detroit," Syme recalled, "there were 20 houses on my block. With two-to-three kids in each house. You could walk outside your

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Open communication, fight denial to stop suicides

BY TIM SMITH
STAFF WRITER

Do you love me? Did you want me? Am I the reason you got divorced?

Those questions often prevail as those that youths considered at-risk to commit suicide want most to ask parents, provided they were guaranteed to receive honest responses, said Temple Beth El Rabbi Daniel Syme.

"The thing is," said Syme, who is teaching the Reach For Hope pilot program at the Bloomfield Township synagogue, "is I know those parents love their kids. We don't know why they (the children) don't know."

Enter Beth El congregational educator Joyce Seglin and area

psychiatrist Dr. Donald Silver, who are developing a Beth El course geared toward helping parents and young children learn the importance of loving communication with each other. Coping skills are also expected to be a major component.

"Moms and dads can give them the tools to deal with what comes at them later in life," explained Seglin about the premise of the course.

Silver concurred. If self-esteem is stronger at an earlier age, chances are less later on for "overwhelming feelings of damaged self-regard" that lead to suicide.

"The issue is prevention," Silver said. "The major thrust we can really make is solid begin-

nings. We're looking at the picture from very early on, to the late adolescents."

Because children as young as age five are attempting or committing suicide, it is crucial for parents not to delay applying "mental hugs."

"The real target for helping children is healthy development, virtually from birth on," said Silver, who volunteered to help Seglin on the curriculum. "The first four-to-five years are absolutely crucial."

Better parent-child communication, earlier, also can help crack what Syme labeled "the enormous barrier of denial" among parents that their children are dangerously depressed.

Sadly, denial spreads from

homes to schools.

A string of suicides at Oxford High School is a recent local example. Teenagers there died before full-blown intervention attempts were begun. But Seglin recalled the "Beverly Hills Five," during the early 1980s.

"Five teenagers, one old enough to drive, agreed to a suicide pact. They closed their lockers for the day, and checked out for life. Their bodies were found in a car that plummeted off of Mulholland Drive."

Officially, their deaths were ruled an accident.

"But they knew it wasn't an accident. Not dealing with (suicide) openly is a chronic problem in society ... Not much has changed since then."

Teen Suicide in Oakland County

