

POINTS OF VIEW

Give our teens coping tools to halt suicide

It's a big responsibility being a friend these days — especially if you're a young person, West Bloomfield High School teacher Harriet Maza reminded me.

Maza has the advantage, responsibility and privilege of talking to young people in her high school journalism and English classes every day. "We talk to our kids in school about what it means to be a true friend," Maza said.

For high school, and I'm sorry to say middle school students these days, the responses can't come easily to questions like: What do you do if you know your friend is on drugs? What do you do if you know your friend stole something, skipped school, is engaging in unsafe sex? What do you do if he commits suicide and you had no idea or didn't recognize that he was so troubled?

These are hypotheticals. All except the last question. Because family, students and faculty at West Bloomfield High School are mourning the death of Ben Markey, a popular student, who took his own life last week on an otherwise ordinary Monday afternoon in May.

It's a scenario they wish they had the power to change, wish away, forget.

Markey, who would have been 17 this week, drove alone after school to an eight-story parking structure at Larned and Griswold streets in downtown Detroit where he and his friends often skateboarded. Markey apparently jumped from the structure; his skateboard was found next to him on the ground. A witness told Detroit police that the teen sat on the roof for 10 minutes before jumping.

"I think there was no way any of us could tell that was going to happen," his friend and classmate Meghan Busch said. "He didn't share anything with his friends. He always had this wonderful smile."

But now, Busch says, "You have to notice people like that. Their pain is too deep down."

National statistics on teen suicide are frightening. It has increased more than threefold over the last 40 years. Between 600,000-800,000 young people attempt suicide each year. More than 6,000 succeed. In Oakland County, at least 56 teenagers have committed suicide since 1990.

Recently, the *Eccentric* Newspapers did a series of stories on teen suicide in Oakland County. The articles were prompted by three suicides by young people in the Oxford-Lake



JUDITH DONER BERNE

Orion area within a nine-month period. As those communities searched for ways to confront the problem, they found other teens who admitted their own attempts to harm themselves. "This problem isn't a school problem," said Oxford Schools Superintendent Marion Ginopolis. "It's a community problem."

And some people in our towns are rising to meet it. Oxford and Lake Orion schools have expanded counseling efforts and the community has formed a task force to bring adults, parents and youngsters together. In Rochester Hills, a psychologist has begun a teen support group. In Bloomfield Township, Rabbi Daniel Syme of Temple Beth El has established a six-week pilot course, offering hope and concrete guidance to teens and parents as an antidote to suicide. To him, it's very personal. His brother, Michael, committed suicide at age 21.

"I tell kids that once you're dead, you're dead," Syme said. "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 envisions expanding the program to Oakland County high schools and other community groups. The goal is to give people education and insight to keep a tragedy from occurring. "The overwhelming number of these kids don't want to die," Syme said. "They just want help."

Although help is available, young people and the friends that care about them often are the last to avail themselves of it. Oakland County's Common Ground has a 24-hour Crisis Line, (248) 466-0909, manned by trained personnel. But programs director Joanne Lindensmith said teens contemplating suicide "don't always share with their friends," she says. "What we worry about is once they do share it, friends are often afraid to break their confidence."

Maza knows what she's talking about. It's tough being a friend — especially if you're young person. Let's give them all the tools we can. Judith Doner Berne, a West Bloomfield resident, is former managing editor of the *Eccentric* Newspapers. You can comment on this column by calling (313) 953-2047, Ext. 197.

LETTERS

Reid: Intelligence, Integrity

The voters of Farmington Public Schools will on June 9 select two citizens to serve as board members for the next four years. All residents of the districts have an important responsibility to familiarize themselves with the qualification of each of the three candidates so that a truly informed choice can be made on June 9.

My service as a board member from 1978 to 1985 gives me a perspective based on eight years of experience. For whatever it is worth I want to share that with other voters in next month's election.

I suggest school electors give favorable consideration to the outstanding qualifications of Frank L. Reid. It was my good fortune to work with Frank on a school planning committee during the 18 months. Frank clearly displayed intelligence, intellectual integrity, humor, people skills, and last but not least, humility. In short, I believe he is someone who does his own thinking, but at the same time would work very well with the other trustees, the administration, and the community.

Dick Wallace
Farmington Hills

Great job on WalkAmerica

On behalf of the March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers for doing such a great job of covering WalkAmerica, which took place on Sunday, April 27, in Farmington Hills. This event really is a hometown effort, and it should be said that we could never do it without the help of the wonderful Farmington walk route volunteers. Over 1,100 walkers raised more than \$100,000. In southeast Michigan more than 17,000 walkers and volunteers raised \$1.4 million in 14 separate walks.

I would like to thank the Mayor of Farmington Hills, Aldo Vagnozzi, and the beautiful city of Farmington Hills. Another special thanks to the Farmington Hills Police Department and to the Oakland Community College Police Safety officers for safely guiding the walkers along the eight mile route. We were most grateful for the participation of the Farmington Hills Fire Department Paramedics who volunteered their time to provide first aid for walkers at eight locations along the route. Kudos to the Farmington Hills Amateur Radio Club members who kept everybody in touch with each other throughout the day, and to the Civil Air Patrol volunteers for helping out with every facet of the event. We also want the

thank our Army National Guard volunteers for their help with applying water at every checkpoint.

Walkers raved about the special treats provided by our checkpoint sponsors: Frontier Communications, the Telephone Pioneers, Sprint, K-Mart, Canton Distribution Center, the Kroger Company, Bruegger's Bagels, the Florida Department of Citrus, and Big Apple Bagel. Many thanks to the local businesses who allowed us the use of their property for the checkpoints: Kindercare, Amaritoch, Hamilton House - Assisted Living Services, Farmington Public Schools and Dave Devroy, maintenance supervisor at O. E. Dunkel Middle School, and Michigan National Bank.

Following the walk, participants were able to obtain podiatry care compliments of Dr. Marshall Solomon and his associates from Botsford Hospital, and many took advantage of a free massage offered to walkers by Irene's Institute of Myomassage. Exotic Rubber & Plastics and the firms of Dan Nemes, Tom Nemes, John Nemes, and Charlie and Joe Nemes started something new this year. As Hospitality Tent sponsors — they cooked and served more 1,500 hot dogs and Pepsi to participants after the walk. Our thanks to Pepsi and the Kroger Company for their donations. Entertainment during lunch was provided by the always delightful Mrs. Michigan, Karyn Fahoone, who sang country/western tunes, and the Note Poets who performed original selections from their new CD. Nic and Hadi from 96.3 FM the Planet, and Lomas Brown from the Michigan Disc Jockey Network, also did a great job with the show.

I want to extend my sincere appreciation to the staff of Oakland Community College — Orchard Ridge Campus for all of their help with WalkAmerica. A special thanks goes to the city of Farmington Hills, Special Services Department, Parks Division for providing the showmobile stage, and for saving the show that morning with a generator from their department when ours quit just before show time.

The March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation's Campaign for Healthier Babies would like to see that every baby has a healthy start on life. WalkAmerica is the March of Dimes' biggest fund-raiser and contributes up to 50 percent of all the money raised annually to support programs of community services, advocacy, research and education to prevent birth defects and reduce infant mortality.

Maggie Champagne
Farmington Hills WalkAmerica Route Coordinator

Common tongue unites us

We had some visitors recently from Toronto. At dinner one night, talk turned to the separatist movement that failed by an eyelash to take the (French-speaking) Province of Quebec out of the (bi-lingual by law, English-speaking by fact) Canadian nation. Some representative quotes:

"In the bars in Quebec City, they call you an 'English dog' if they decide you're not a francophone (French speaker)."

"By law in Quebec, all signs are in French. All the English-speaking business and professional people are moving out."

"If the vote had succeeded, I suppose we'd have had to call out the army. There's no way we're going to break up our country."

Here in Michigan, just over the border from Canada, it's a little unsettling to hear otherwise calm and reasonable people speak casually about calling out the army. But it's a perfect example of how incendiary ethnic and language politics can become, even in a country as superficially phlegmatic in character and mostly homogeneous in race as Canada.

Now think about how explosive such politics can be in a country as heterogeneous as our own — a country with an immigration law that, through unintended consequence by 2050, will produce this demographic mix:

- Less than half European-descended whites.
- 25 percent Hispanic.
- 12 percent African American.
- The rest a mix of Asians, Native Americans and people of mixed race.

Uniquely in the world, America is culture that is built not on a shared history but on a promised future. The American Dream — if you work hard and play by the rules, you and your family will become more prosperous than ever before in your genetic history — is still alive and kicking.

"We've never had this kind of diversity before," says Loyola University sociologist Philip Lyden, "and neither has anybody else. The big question of the next century is, what kind of society is America going to be?"

"The country's going to balkanize," predicts William Frey, the respected director of the University of Michigan's Population Studies Center.

The parts of the country most affected will be the West and the Northeast, with the Midwest least impacted. According to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, from 1991-96,



PHILIP POWER

more than 89,000 immigrants moved to Michigan. In a representative sample, they came from: Iraq (8,882); India (7,674); Mexico (6,118); former Soviet Union (5,437); Canada (5,392); China (4,396); Vietnam (3,843); Poland (3,240). Quite a mix.

It's not surprising to see notices in Japanese in Auburn Hills, grocery stores featuring Indian food in Farmington and Arab markets in Dearborn.

The clash between what we have been and what we are becoming is the most intense in our schools, still struggling to help make Americans out of successive waves of immigrants and still flopping between compassion and realism.

Some advocates argue passionately that teaching kids, who speak little English, in their native language preserves the integrity of their cultures and gives them a needed lift toward fluency in English. Some years ago, this line of thought went so far in Ann Arbor (where else?) that some black parents sued the school district to require "Black English" ("Ebonics," in recent terms) be taught to black kids.

I can't agree. Sure, we ought to give kids who can't speak English a helping hand while they're learning. But to do anything more is just going to hurt them. At the end of the day, they'll have to learn English in order to participate fully in the society to which they (or their parents) wanted willingly to come.

The one thing that unites this country that is more heterogeneous than any other in history is the English language. Doing anything to reduce this common bond is to play with fire.

Phil Power is chairman of the company that owns this newspaper. His Touch-Tone voice mail number is (313) 953-2047 ext. 1880.

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