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Volunteers say it's time Valley gets a hold on suicide prevention

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MENASHA -- Clean your room, Wendy Zimmer told her boys before she left the house Jan. 15. It was just a normal Sunday.

You make your children the center of your life. You give them everything you have in the way of love, patience and encouragement. The result is the best any parent could dare hope: Your 15-year-old son is class president, is talented academically and athletically, and is beloved by many, especially you.

Then one Sunday, after church with your kids, you leave for a little shopping trip with your husband. When you get home an hour later, your firstborn is dead, and the last conversation you had with him was about cleaning his room.

Justin Zimmer shot himself Jan. 15. His younger brother found him.

"He was the last person in the world who ever would have done that," Wendy Zimmer says. Suicide, the Zimmers want people to understand, is not reserved for "losers" and dysfunctional families.

The Fox Cities Victim Crisis Response Team, a group of volunteers who help law enforcement agencies meet victims' needs, has been called to the scene of nine suicides so far this year. Seven of the victims, including Justin Zimmer, were younger than 25. The team's coordinator, Barb Bigalke, thinks the Fox Cities, despite its many fine attributes, is in the Dark Ages of suicide prevention and awareness.

"We are behind, without a doubt. When you hear somebody committed suicide, we almost avoid it," Bigalke said. "We don't talk about the person who is depressed. We need to. What if you aren't happy in the Happy Valley?"

Bigalke is disappointed that the Fox Cities was not one of the areas in Wisconsin recently chosen to participate in a three-year, \$1 million effort to prevent teen suicide.

"We are a big community," she said. "We definitely should have been part of it. Look at our suicide rate."

She has been told that the Fox Cities -- Neenah, Men-asha, Appleton, Kimberly, Little Chute, Combined Locks and Kaukauna -- suicide rate is among the state's highest, though that was not evident from any source [↔](#)The Post-Crescent consulted.

Suicide deaths are tracked by county, and the Fox Cities are split between three counties. It was one of the frustrations researchers encountered in compiling the recently published Fox Cities 2006 LIFE (Leading Indicators For Excellence) study.

To arrive at a suicide rate, they took the total number of suicides in Calumet, Outagamie and Winnebago counties and divided them by the counties' combined populations to arrive at a rate of 11 per 100,000 of population in 2004.

The rates for Outagamie and Winnebago counties, however, were 11.8 and 11.7 respectively -- at or slightly higher than state's 11.7 average.

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But the researchers found that on Youth Risk Behavior Surveys conducted in various Fox Cities school districts, 14 percent of the 10th-graders reported they had attempted suicide in the previous year -- a rate about 50 percent higher than the state average.

Each of the school districts is required to establish a suicide prevention curriculum, and Outagamie County's crisis intervention program operates a crisis line and offers face-to-face counseling, along with other services.

"This area is resource rich compared to a lot of parts of the state, even some of our neighboring counties," says Diane Mandler, who oversees Outagamie County's resource center.

Nevertheless, the researchers who prepared the **LIFE study** found that the shortage of psychiatrists in the area is critical, and that untreated mental health and substance abuse problems are a challenge.

"We need more resources in our community than we have right now, especially for kids and teens," says Karen Aspenson, executive director for the National Alliance on Mental Health Fox Valley. "I don't think anybody right now is doing any solid focused suicide prevention."

Bigalke hopes to galvanize change. She and Menasha Police Department investigator Jim Verkuilen are working to raise \$2,000 in donations for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and are in a good-natured rivalry to see which of them is in better shape for the foundation's 20-mile walk overnight through Chicago on Aug. 13.

Bigalke is participating to memorialize the area's suicide victims, strip the stigmatism from their deaths and pick some attending experts' brains.

"Let's start looking at other communities. What are they doing right? What are they doing wrong. Let's learn," she says. "It's about acknowledging we have suicide in our area. What are we going to do about it? We need to be aware not only of the kid who is walking around looking depressed, but also of the kid who is at the top of his game."

Before he died, Justin Zimmer had been taking the acne drug Accutane, which has been associated with depression in some patients. Despite his assurances he would tell his parents if he felt unwell, they say he didn't give either them or his friends any indication he might have been depressed. To them, he appeared excited about getting his driver's license in a couple of weeks. That Monday, he told them, he was going to ask a girl friend to become his girlfriend.

His family couldn't go home for weeks after he died. His mother still hasn't been able to listen to a recording of his voice. His friends leave agonized notes at his grave.

"Hey, bud," a friend wrote. "I miss you more than anything. I never knew one person could make such a difference in the world. I wish I could have you back more than anything in the world."

The Zimmers applaud Bigalke's efforts.

"If somebody else can know the pain we go through maybe it would stop them from taking their own life," Warren Zimmer said. "I cry every day. It's just as bad now as it was then. It doesn't get any easier."

Hotline

Outagamie County Crisis Intervention: 920-832-4646. Anonymous, confidential 24-hour telephone counseling

On the Web

NAMI Fox Valley Inc. (National Alliance on Mental Illness): 516 W. Sixth St., Appleton. 920-954-1550. www.namifoxvalley.org.

Susan Squires can be reached at 920-993-1000, ext. 368, or by e-mail at ssquires@postcrescent.com.

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