

# Program identifies signs of suicide

West Orange students help launch a prevention effort funded by a couple whose son killed himself.

By **SANDRA MATHERS**  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

WINTER GARDEN — At 25, Michael Buonauro seemed to have it all: his own apartment, a good job and a successful comics Web site.

He was a senior at the University of Central Florida who wrote for the college newspaper, and he was a funny guy whose sense of humor included classroom pranks with friends.

But none of those things kept Buonauro alive.

On May 28, 2004 — the day after his 25th birthday — Buonauro shot himself through the heart.

His suicide left his parents, Frank and Judy Buonauro of Windermere, grief-stricken and unprepared. Their psychological wounds are still raw.

Even so, Judy Buonauro stood before several hundred students in the auditorium at West Orange High School on Friday to tell her son's heartbreaking story, and to debut a new suicide-prevention program that this year is expected to reach 60,000 Orange County high-school students in both the public and private sectors.

The Signs of Suicide Prevention Program, or SOS, a nationally recognized initiative from Massachusetts, is being funded in Orange by The Michael Buonauro Foundation, with an initial \$600,000 donation from his parents, who own and operate the Osceola Flea and Farmer's Market in Kissimmee.

"We would have done anything to save our son," said his mother, her voice cracking, as she stood near a framed picture of her smiling boy. "We didn't know the signs of suicide. Neither did his friends and teachers.

"Suicide is a terrible waste of a life and a future. . . . It's a severe and permanent solution to a terrible problem, but one that can be resolved."

SOS, a school-based prevention program, is designed to reduce suicides among teens by teaching them to look for danger signs.

Among those signs: threats of suicide, depression or anger, a drop in grades and access to guns.

The program uses classroom videos and printed material to hammer home a single acronym: ACT, or Acknowledge the problem, Care enough to suggest help for a suicidal person and Tell your suspicions to a responsible adult.

SOS has shown results since it was developed by Screening for Mental Health Inc., a nonprofit organization in Wellesley Hills, Mass., said Barbara Kopans, the group's vice president.

"A study showed 40 percent fewer suicides occurred in control groups among students who were introduced to the program," Kopans said. "It empowers kids."

The program already has proven its worth at West Orange High, where students viewed the video this week, said Marge LaBarge, senior administrator for Orange County Safe and Drug Free Schools, which is partnering with SOS.

"Within two days of showing the video here, five students have been identified as suicidal," LaBarge said. "We know it's making a difference, and we know it's going to work."

Although statistics on the number of students who actually commit suicide are not kept by Orange County schools, 500 high-school students considered or attempted suicide last year, LaBarge said.

The Buonauros said they hope to expand SOS to high schools, and eventually middle schools, in Osceola, Seminole and Brevard counties by raising \$6 million over 10 years — with the help of the state Legislature.

They said a bill to fund the program will be introduced in the Legislature. Most of the money will be used to treat students identified as suicidal.

"We were totally blindsided [by Michael's death]," Judy Buonauro said. "We had no clue. The purpose of the program is to give people a clue."

---

Sandra Mathers can be reached at [smathers@orlandosentinel.com](mailto:smathers@orlandosentinel.com) or 407-420-5507.