

Signs of Suicide — an SOS

Parents of suicide victims bring prevention program to Orange County high schools

Cortney Kowalisyn

STAFF WRITER

Only one year has passed since Frank and Judy Buonauro experienced the kind of horror that parents fear most; that of having to bury their teenage son.

But it wasn't a tragic car wreck or fatal illness that stole away Michael, the couple's only child. Such a reality might have been easier for them to digest. Rather, the Windermere residents must face the fact that their son's life was taken by his own hand, for reasons that they may never fully understand.

Motivated to help prevent other families from enduring the pain of such unnecessary loss, the grieving couple formed their own organization, the Michael Buonauro Foundation. From there, they turned to Florida Hospital to seek out a suicide-prevention program with the capacity to stop other suicidal teens from choosing to end their lives.

As a result of their efforts, the Signs of Suicide Prevention Program (SOS), singled out for its success as the first school-based suicide prevention program to demonstrate significant reductions in self-reported suicide attempts, will now be available to students at every public high school in Orange County.

The launch was celebrated during a recent kick-off event at West Orange High

School, when the Buonauros announced their \$100,000 pledge to make the nationally recognized program possible locally.

It's a move they hope will help to reduce local incidences of suicide, a phenomenon that happens to be the third most

“He was my only child and the hole in my heart grows deeper every day. He was the light of our life and we will miss him 'til the day we die.”

**Judy Buonauro,
mother of a suicide victim**

prevalent cause of death in the United States among children ages 10-19.

For Scott Grove, a SAFE (Student Assistance and Family Empowerment) coordinator at Timber Creek High School for the past five years, and at Colonial High School for four years before that, observing talk of suicide among high school students is, unfortunately, not a rare event.

“It happens quite a lot, actually,” said

Grove, who, along with fellow Orange County SAFE coordinators, undergoes training sessions each year to prepare him to talk with students that have expressed suicidal tendencies. This year alone, he has already talked to five students who

According to district SAFE coordinator Maggie Reynolds, the program includes a video that displays real-life stories and interviews with experts in the field of psychiatry, a discussion guide, as well as a letter that goes home to parents.

“The intention is to let the community know what to look for and what to do if someone is at risk,” said Reynolds.

The SOS program encourages students who observe at-risk indicators to acknowledge the signs, respond with care and tell a responsible adult.

Once suicidal students are identified, SAFE coordinators like Grove take immediate action.

“After talking to the students, one of the things we do is we have a legal guardian come in and we refer them to outside resources. Usually they'll go to Florida Hospital East to see a mental health doctor, who can evaluate exactly why they are feeling this way,” he said.

Intent to spread the program to other counties too, the Buonauros have caught the attention of lawmakers. State Representative Sandy Adams is currently sponsoring a bill along with Sen. Dan Webster to allocate \$600,000 to seeing the program implemented in Orange, Osceola, Seminole and Brevard counties for the next 10 years.

In “A last word for Michael,” an Internet posting placed by Judy Buonauro on the Web site formerly maintained by her son, the heartbroken mother illustrates the sort of grief she hopes that SOS will prevent other families from experiencing.

were contemplating suicide, while fellow Timber Creek SAFE coordinator Jolynn Shall has already talked to 10.

“We take every case extremely seriously because you never know, but the students range from the ones who actually have a plan for how they intend to carry out their death, to those who have had thoughts about suicide cross their minds.”

Striving to teach students how to identify signs of suicide within themselves and others, SOS employs two core strategies: teaching how to identify signs