

## In Their Shoes an exhibit by Attitudes in Reverse in Woodland Park to prevent suicide

By Jim Beckerman

Pain can be measured in tears, pills, shots of whiskey.

In Woodland Park on Saturday, it was measured in shoes.

Some 277 pairs, along 300 feet of walkway in Dowling Gardens, bore witness to unfathomable pain: of young people who are no longer there to fill those boots, sandals and sneakers.

Teen suicide— suicide and mental trauma in general — was the subject of a sobering exhibit brought to the town by the Stigma Free Task Force, a group that since 2016 has been raising awareness of a growing problem.

On each pair of shoes, a tag with a quote. Actual words from a young person who died by suicide. "I can't understand why I can't be happy." "I have to sit alone at lunch." "My coach doesn't believe in me." "I am afraid to tell my parents that I am gay." "Everyone thinks I have so much to live for, except me." "My boyfriend hits me." "Every day I want to die."

The powerful "In Their Shoes" exhibit will be on display in Woodland Park on May 15.

"This is incredibly moving," said U.S. Rep. Mikie Sherrill, one of a number of state and local officials who appeared Saturday morning to pay their respects and lend their support. Others included former New Jersey Gov. Richard Codey — known, along with his wife, Mary Jo Codey, as an advocate of mental health issues — and Mayors Keith Kazmark of Woodland Park and Scott A. Luna of Lodi.

To all of them — as with most of us — suicide was more than an abstract issue. Everyone, it seemed, knew someone: the son of a family friend, a neighbor, a colleague who seemed perfectly OK, until.

There was the police officer who shot himself, just across the street from Kazmark, after a 2016 standoff that had the entire neighborhood on lockdown.

"Unfortunately it ended with a shot that everyone in the neighborhood heard," Kazmark said. "Most people who interacted with this prosecutor's officer probably thought he had it all together. He went out and protected the lives of



*Miki a therapy dog stands by shoes that have notes attached to represent young people who committed suicide are part of "In Their Shoes", an exhibit at Dowling Gardens in Woodland Park, NJ on May 15, 2021, bringing attention to suicide by young people who lost hope due to mental health disorders. The exhibit was created by Attitudes in Reverse to encourage early intervention to prevent suicides. • Chris Pedota, NorthJersey.com-USA Today Network*

everyone in that town. But in fact he was struggling with the demons inside."

Or consider, said Sherrill, a former U.S. Navy helicopter pilot, the genuinely tough military people who can seemingly handle everybody's problems but their own. Suicide among vets remains a huge issue, Sherrill said.

"Today, it's really important to think about the children, because that's what a lot of the community is here for," she said. "But there's also the incidents of suicide among our military members. It's bad enough among our general military, but among our female veterans it's especially bad."

If the heroes among us are vulnerable, anybody could be. Luna, also a baseball coach for Paramus Catholic High School, thinks about this a lot.



Notes attached to the shoes of young people who committed suicide are part of "In Their Shoes", an exhibit at Dowling Gardens in Woodland Park, NJ on May 15, 2021, bringing attention to suicide by young people who lost hope due to mental health disorders. The exhibit was created by Attitudes in Reverse to encourage early intervention to prevent suicides. • Chris Pedota, NorthJersey.com-USA Today Network

"It really makes you think, what do you look for?" Luna said. "We take all these classes: 'What to look for.' You try to find signs in a kid."

And when you do find the signs?

'People who are struggling don't want to die. They want help'

It's still not easy, say Tricia and Kurt Baker of Plainsboro, who created the "In their Shoes" display in 2015. It has since traveled to several hundred locations in New Jersey. It's the flagship project of their group, Attitudes in Reverse (AIR), founded in 2010 — the year after their 19-year-old son, Kenny, died by suicide.

"Any time he needed help we kind of picked up on it," Tricia Baker said. "And Kenny was always willing to go help himself. Always. People who are struggling don't want to die. They want help. In the beginning, he has very open, but I think as the illness progressed he began to think his family and everybody else would be better off without him. I always say these illnesses lie to your brains."

Kenny started wandering off. He began to be periodically hospitalized — six times in all. He admitted to the hospital staff that he had stood on railroad tracks and came near to letting himself be run over. He attempted suicide once, by swallowing 400 ibuprofen. His parents bore with all of it, watching him progress some days, only to slide back the day after. To the end, he fought, they said. He wanted help. But in May 2009, he lost the battle.

Adding to the grief his parents felt, was the way people around them dealt with the issue. Or didn't deal with it.

"When our son died, the response was they wanted to sticker over his picture in the yearbook," Tricia Baker said. "They didn't want to say his name in the building. They were afraid of contagion. If everyone knows there's a suicide and you don't address it, it perpetuates the shame and it perpetuates the stigma.

"We have to talk about it and get it out there, so that young people who are living with these thoughts of suicide know they're not alone and there's help available."

Stigma around teen suicide doesn't help

The stigma is a huge part of what makes this issue so daunting. "I grew up in a funeral home," Codey said. "If you were a Catholic, and you were a suicide, you weren't allowed a Christian funeral. There was a stigma. That's one of my big issues."

Such concerns led to the creation of the Stigma Free Task Force in 2016, the year six Woodland Park teens died by suicide. "It encourages discussion of mental health, so that no one feels alone," said Christine Tiseo, vice chair of the group. "We want to reduce the stigma, to make it easier for people to speak about their feelings and know they're not alone. There's help and resources and friends out there."

Among the shoes on display are those of celebrities, adding a bit of moral support: Glenn Close and former U.S. Rep. Patrick Kennedy, among others. "The exhibit was very heavy, so we started to become concerned," Kurt Baker said. "We wanted the message to be hope. We thought maybe celebrities because they have such a big platform, would create a positive message: We support you. We want you to get the help you need."

And some pairs of footwear, on display, are more important still.

"Our son has a few pairs of shoes here," Tricia Baker said.

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