

Life filled with pressure for many teens

Central social workers discuss importance of depression awareness in suicide prevention

By Pamela Lannom

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"We spend more time scrolling through Instagram Than telling a girl she's beautiful And in health class, when the teacher asks if we know someone who suffers from depression, we don't even notice the boy by our side who grimaces — because he's one of them ... All the missed connections, There are more than you think. There's that girl who missed your glance Blocked by your hypnotic cell phone trance Who is now laced with scars, Whose sadness is really ours. And that boy, from health class, who would be your best friend if you had taken the time to notice But now he does all he can, drugs, alcohol, self-harm, so that he is numb To this world that is out of focus." — from "Rush Hour" by Hinsdale Central senior Emma Stapleton

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Emma Stapleton is spending her senior year at Hinsdale Central trying to disconnect from social media and connect with her fellow students.

"I think we are just out of focus sometimes in our priorities in life and I think Hinsdale Central for many people is a stressful environment," she said. "I think that people get distracted in the way that they live their daily life because of the stress.

"I think a lot of the times the pain and the stress and the hurt that people are feeling goes unnoticed because of this lack of focus on others and on experience in our lives."

Social media has changed life dramatically for high school students. In addition to pulling students' focus away from face-to-face interactions, it can exacerbate the pressures many feel — especially at a school like Hinsdale Central.

Viewing posts that show only the highlights of classmates' lives can leave a student feeling like everyone

else is doing everything else better.

"And not everybody is," said Claudia Kelly, a social worker at the school. "That is the other thing social media promotes. It reinforces this idea of perfection."

At the same time, Central students are earning perfect ACT scores, succeeding on varsity sports teams, capturing the lead in the school play and earning admission at the most prestigious universities.

"There are really exceptional things that happen here," Kelly said. "I think we would be ignorant if we said that kids were oblivious to that and it didn't impact them. These kids are really smart. Their parents are really, really bright and really, really successful."

These factors can lead teens to expect life will always be wonderful — and leave them paralyzed when something goes wrong, said Kelly and her colleagues in the Hinsdale Central social work department.

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"When you operate under this assumption that everything is supposed to be great all the time, what happens when it's not great? The kids that I really worry about are the kids that have an inability to stand tall in the middle of a storm," Kelly said.

When teens find they can't manage their life, their first reaction often is not to reach out for help.

"They tend to internalize a lot, and
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List allows parents to share resources in confidence

By Pamela Lannom

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Asking a neighbor to recommend a good dentist or allergist for a child is easy.

Asking that same neighbor to recommend a good psychiatrist because a child is contemplating suicide would be extremely difficult.

That realization led Tara DeGeer to create The Parent List in cooperation with the Hinsdale Central PTO.

Last spring DeGeer was driving through town with her son, then a senior at Hinsdale Central, and noticed white ribbons tied around trees that lined the streets. She learned a Central student had committed suicide. Her son said he was worried about copycat incidents.

"We just sat there in silence and drove past the ribbons," she said.

Later she wondered who she would call if she were concerned about her child's mental health.

"You can reach out to your neighbors to find a babysitter, but you may not feel comfortable reaching out about certain health issues because you don't want to divulge your child's private situation," said DeGeer, who lived in Hinsdale for 10 years before moving to Burr Ridge

two years ago.

She started thinking about creating a resource list and approached Pat Huebner in Hinsdale Central's guidance/social work department. Huebner liked the idea, offered some input and suggested DeGeer contact Audrey Galvin to see if she might be interested in working on the project. Galvin created the Internet format to make DeGeer's idea a reality.

"She's the one who gave it life," DeGeer said.

DeGeer wanted to have the site up and running by the time school started and she met her goal. She and Sarah Magnesen, another PTO leader and longtime friend, emailed parents they knew, inviting them to submit a review to the list. Only parents of children at Hinsdale Central or one of its feeder schools can contribute to the list.

"The parents have an interest in all the children attending school with their children being happy and healthy, so they are going to give sincere, truthful reviews to help other families," DeGeer said.

The list, available at hcpto.org/parent-network-resources/, currently offers reviews for several mental health resources, including psychiatrists, therapists,



Tara DeGeer worked with other moms in the Hinsdale Central PTO to launch The Parent List. The list offers a place for parents to provide confidential reviews of mental health professionals, doctors, tutors and

other individuals. "You don't have to tell about your family's private issue or your child's private issue," she said. "You can give some good, anonymous advice." (Jim Slonoff photo)

in-patient and out-patient programs. Some of the comments are quite informative.

"We're not getting that kind of detailed content on WebMD or on Blue Cross Blue Shield," she said.

No negative comments are posted, DeGeer said, acknowledging some people might have a different experience with a provider on the list. As more reviews are posted, patterns might emerge, she said.

Parents of Central students can send an email to parentlist@hcpto.org to post

a review. Parents of students at other schools should contact their PTO representative, DeGeer said.

The list, which includes resources for a variety of health and behavioral issues, now contains about 40 reviews. DeGeer hopes it will continue to grow.

She has been working with the PTOs at Hinsdale Central feeder districts to get them involved.

"Eventually I hope it will really take off and it will be comprised of all your neighbors' good advice, but their

privacy is protected and your privacy is protected, but you're exchanging that sincere, valuable input on what has worked."

DeGeer, whose late mother struggled with mental illness, also believes that one day the reason she started the list in the first place will no longer exist.

"This is going to be a more accepted ailment and the current stigma that is attached to mental illness is going to fall away rapidly in the next few years," she said. "That's what I think."

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it gets to a point where they can't internalize any more," social worker Ilyssa Hoffman said.

"I think that there are a lot of students who do a really good job of masking it," she added. "They're getting those straight A's in those tough classes and they're really involved in sports and they seem like they're doing fine but they get to the breaking point."

Stapleton agreed.

"I think it's surprising when you learn about specific people that are struggling," she said. "Individually I think people come off as very happy and very positive people."

A student who learns he or she hasn't achieved a good grade or earned a spot on a varsity team might feel like life is over, the social workers said.

That can lead to depression. And depression puts teens at risk for suicide.

Central has worked with an organization called Erika's Lighthouse that focuses on the link between teen depression and teen suicide.

"One of their messages is that suicide prevention is about depression awareness," Kelly said. "How we prevent suicide is talking about depression, talking about warning signs, what that looks like, so everybody can be aware of what those warning signs are."

One of the reasons students experience depression is they feel like they can't manage their own lives.

Many students have yet to realize how much control they do have, the social workers said, often because parents have always come to the rescue.

"A lot of times we want to make things better or we don't want them to feel pain and suffering and distress, not realizing that unfortunately, as they get older, it's going to be there and we don't have control over being there for them all the time," social worker Jim Kupres said.

Kelly echoed those remarks.

"Kids who have been in situations where they have been 'saved' tend to have an external locus of control vs. an internal locus of control," she said. "When disaster strikes and (the teen is) the only one there, why should we expect them to think they can handle the disaster? They've never had to ride the wave. They've never had the opportunity to exer-

cise any control."

Students also need to be able to manage discomfort, Jennifer Cave said. That was one of the messages of author Harlen Cohen, a recent speaker at the high school. He urged seniors to spend some time thinking about things that make them uncomfortable, Cave said.

"You have to be able to face that," she said.

Cohen emphasized that students need to learn this skill before heading off to college, Hoffman said. "You're going to have to make friends and you're going to be put into uncomfortable positions where it's important to make the healthy choice," she said.

Having a friend to stand beside you can make a real difference in high school, said Stapleton, who is friends with a younger Central student who has attempted suicide. At first, Stapleton confessed, she was worried about saying the wrong thing.

"What I kind of learned going forward was that what she needed wasn't someone to say the right words but someone to listen and to be there to support her no matter what she was going through," Stapleton said.

Hinsdale Central social workers encouraged students who need help — from short-term assistance coping with a particular problem or a referral for outside counseling — to visit the department.

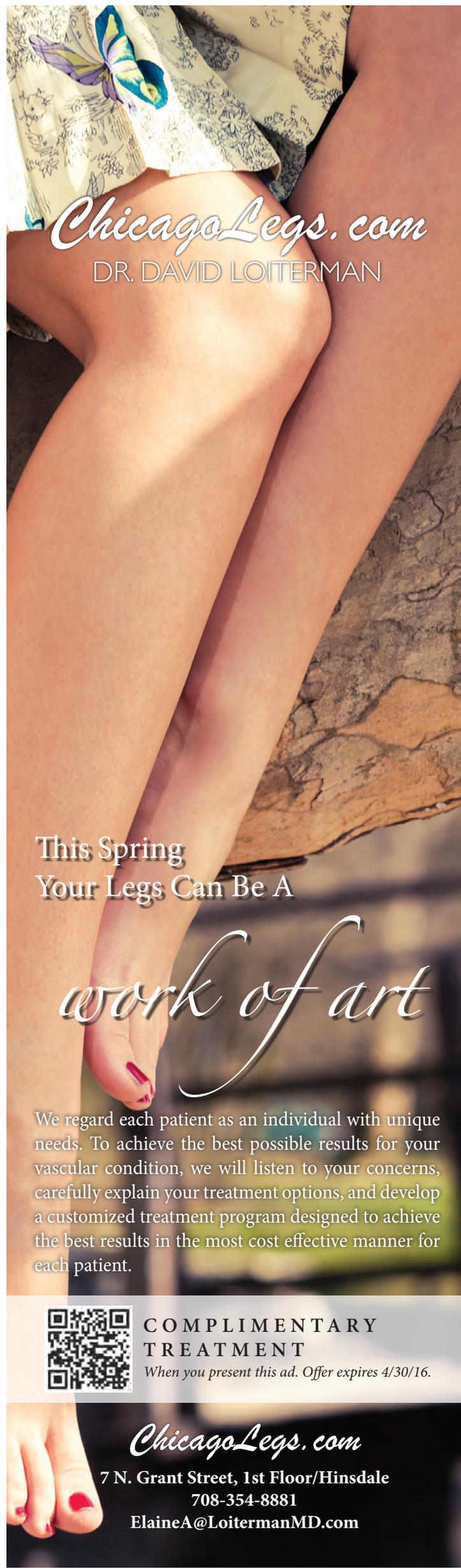
Students can visit confidentially with a social worker up to five times before a parent has to be notified. Staff members have a range of referral options, covering everything from outpatient counseling to inpatient care.

If teens are willing to see a therapist, parents should determine the type of person they would like to work with, the social workers advised. For example, is the teen seeking a lot of suggestions or rather someone who will mostly listen?

If the student and therapist aren't connecting, move on, Hoffman said.

"You want to ... (find) somebody who is a good fit before they dismiss the idea of therapy," she said.

"There are options out there if you want to seek additional resources," social worker Allison Fish said. "We are lucky to be in an area where there are an abundance of them."



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