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Fairfield couple who lost son to suicide brings message of hope and awareness in Wilton

Jarret Liotta
Feb. 20, 2023

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Jim Kuczo of Fairfield talks about his son, Kevin, during the event called "A Real Conversation About Mental Health," presented at the Trackside Teen Center on Monday, Feb. 13, 2023.
Photo by Jarret Liotta

WILTON — Striving to find purpose in the suicide death of their son two years ago, a Fairfield couple came to Wilton to share their experiences and encourage awareness of mental-health issues.

"Kids are under a lot of pressure and a lot of stress lately," said Kristen Kuczo, whose son Kevin died in February 2021 at the age of 17 after struggling with depression.

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"I feel like a lot of these kids need to understand that they're not alone if they're struggling," she said.

Her husband, Jim Kuczo, led a program entitled "A Real Conversation About Mental Health," presented at the Trackside Teen Center on Monday, Feb. 13. He shared for an hour, talking about their experiences with their son in life and death, and how they don't want it to happen to another family.

"We want to raise awareness," Kristen Kuczo said.

The couple presented the program on behalf of a nonprofit called Kevin's Afterglow, in his memory, they started last year to raise awareness about at-risk youth who are dealing with mental illnesses.

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"We want to educate parents and children on mental health," Jim Kuczo told the crowd of about 100, which included some school officials and Wilton police officers, as well as many parents and teens.

Kuczo talked about what he called a significant mental health crisis among young people that is exacerbated by an insufficient number of mental health professionals to help.

"We want to help address the pediatric mental health crisis. ... There's not enough doctors out there to address this, and now, after COVID, it's just gone on steroids," he said.

Kuczo put some of the blame for his son's death on the COVID-19 pandemic.

"He didn't die of COVID, but he died of COVID," Kuczo said of his son, citing the isolation and canceled activities as abetting his son's depression.

"What did my son have to look forward to?" he said.

"I think we did a great injustice to a whole generation of kids. ... We treated our kids like prisoners," he said of the early days of the pandemic.

Simultaneously, Kuczo described his son's depression as "high-functioning depression, or smiling depression," saying that Kevin was among those who

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didn't exhibit obvious signs of any mental illness.

Kuczo said that while he and his wife knew that Kevin was struggling, none of his friends were aware that he had any problems.

"He was in pain," Kuczo said. "The pain was real."

He described his son as popular and active at Fairfield Warde High School, where he participated in sports, did well academically and had a penchant for making others feel good.

"He just loved uplifting his friends," Kuczo said of his son. The outpouring of love and support at services and vigils after Kevin's death was a testament to those bonds, he said.

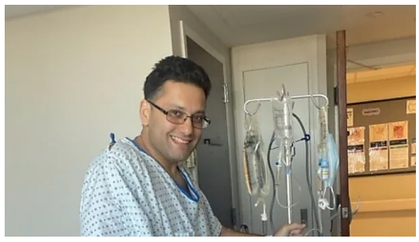
But Jim Kuczo explained that even though his son appeared to have many positives in his life, it didn't mean there weren't issues.

"What I'm trying to convey here (is that) ... his friends did not see this coming," he said, though he and his wife were aware that depression was looming in Kevin's life and tried to find him treatment.

Since the family's tragedy, he said he has found solace and healing through therapies, as well as antidepressant medication. Kuczo indicated that while he previously might have been apprehensive and even cynical about such treatments, the results have been extraordinary in his life.

Kuczo encouraged the young people in attendance to be aware of their friends and even those who may not know well, who could be experiencing depression or other mental-health issues.

"Check in with people ... someone who just moved here, or a friend who's



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Jim's brother, John Kuczo of Redding, said before the program that his brother and sister-in-law's motivation is, if at all possible, to spare other families from similar pain.

"They don't want another to go through what our family has gone through," said John Kuczo, who was Kevin's uncle. "If they can reach one person ... there's no amount of time or energy we wouldn't put in to save a life."

Kristen Kuczo concurred.

"We want kids to know that if they're feeling this way, they're not alone," she said. "They can get help."

Lori Fields, executive director of the center, said a follow-up program will be held at 7 p.m. Thursday, March 9, to answer questions and give people an opportunity to talk about their own experiences.

"There are the kinds of conversations that are really important," Fields said.

The Feb. 13 event can be viewed on the Trackside Teen Center's YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/watch?v=EbPUhO3ZftA&t=6s.

If you or someone you know is struggling with thoughts of suicide, the National Suicide Prevention Hotline can be reached 24/7 at 800-273-8255 or 988.

Written By
Jarret Liotta

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