

Students' suicides devastate Einstein High

Parents, classmates cope with two deaths in two months

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Staff Writers

Following two suicides in two months, parents and students of Albert Einstein High School in Kensington are grappling with how to handle their grief and what lessons can be learned.

On April 19, Elisabeth Stanford, 16, was killed after standing in the path of an oncoming train in Rockville. A month earlier, on March 6, Kanishke Karunaratne, also 16, took his father's gun and shot himself while at home. Both were 11th-graders at Einstein.

The suicides shocked the school community, leading to many questions: Was it teen angst? Depression? Academic stress?

Puthiwadh Huot, an Einstein junior and a friend of Kanishke, said it is a misperception to think academic pressure led to the deaths of his classmates, who were both in the International Baccalaureate program.

As an IB student, Huot said the program is difficult and overwhelming at times, but that for most of his peers, "death is not an option."

"It's not a hard program that makes people die," he said. "Not at all."

Neither Kanishke nor Elisabeth showed any sign that they were going to commit suicide, their families said.

Elisabeth had attempted suicide once before, but after seeing a therapist for two years, she had been doing well, said her mother, Sherri Odegaarden.

"She gave no indications to anyone, including her friends, that [suicide] was something she was considering," Odegaarden said.

In school, Elisabeth struggled with grades, "but if you asked her, she said no, she wasn't really concerned that her grades weren't that great," her mother said.

Before she died, Elisabeth left only one note written on her report card, stating, "This has nothing to do with grades."

Odegaarden said she made a conscious effort not to pressure her daughter. As a high school dropout who now holds a master's degree, Odegaarden knows firsthand that "there's always a way."

Yet as much as she tried to encourage and help her daughter, Elisabeth mostly remained a mystery, Odegaarden said.

"She was a closed book in a lot of ways and I was just guessing at what caused the pressures in her life," Odegaarden said. "I did lose sleep at night worrying that I wasn't doing enough, but I didn't know what else there was to do."

Kanishke was under pressure with daily SAT classes on top of his schoolwork, but his grades were above 3.0 and he appeared to be happy with his friends, said his father, Udaya Karunaratne.

"I thought all the kids had to go through this," he said. "They're teenagers, that will go away after they apply to college and that will be all. This was a real wakeup call — but what an expensive lesson."

Kanishke was a reserved and quiet teenager who often spent his free time playing video games and surfing the Internet. Although he had good friends and served as co-captain of the "It's Academic" team, Kanishke largely "kept everything bottled up inside," Karunaratne said.

The day before Kanishke died, his father had planned to take away his son's computer, concerned that he was spending too much time on video games and not enough time on SAT preparation.

"We try to live for pomp and glory, go to Ivy League schools so we can brag," Karunaratne said. "That's not correct. That's the message that all other parents should have."

Einstein administrators are taking measures to ensure staff, students and parents can cope with the recent suicides and to help them deal with future academic pressure.

"I'm as worried about the staff as I am about the kids," said Principal James Fernandez. "You become a teacher because you want to work closely with kids. ... When something like this happens, it pinches you."

School counselors were available to meet with students following both suicides, but most grieving students did not feel comfortable using them, according to Huot.

"We don't see them as an option for a person to talk to," he said. "We see them as [people] that you go to if you need your classes changed."

Parents also began questioning whether school officials should offer more than grief counseling.

For Einstein staff members, representatives from the Montgomery County Public Schools Employee Assistance Program and Matt Kamins, MCPS supervisor of psychological services, were scheduled to discuss ways to help students deal with death.

On Thursday, **psychologist Stacie Isenberg** will discuss teen stress and anxiety at a meeting for parents and students.

Communication between parents and children is key, said Isenberg, director of the Child and Adolescent program at the Ross Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders in Washington, D.C.

“I think parents can set a tone with their kids, that they are open to hearing whatever they have to say,” she said, adding that parents can also “encourage their kids to approach them when they’re having any kind of difficulty.... And be nonjudgmental about it so that the kids can feel most comfortable approaching their parents.”

While students in the IB program and other academically challenging courses may feel pressure, Fernandez said there are supports in place for students who need help.

“[Parents] put stress on kids, the schools put stress on kids and they put stress on themselves,” Fernandez said. “When you are feeling stress, do you share that with anybody?”

Fernandez said that teachers try to build relationships with students so they feel comfortable coming to them with problems.

He also said that students and parents should know what they’re in for in taking advanced courses.

“We do emphasize to parents the rigor and the involvement in the IB program and in AP classes,” he said. “But this is Montgomery County, and [parents and students] want that rigor.”

In the past, Huot said, no one really thought about suicide much because “we never had to deal with it.”

“And now we’re thinking about those students who are thinking, ‘My life sucks. I want to commit suicide.’ Everyone loves them. That’s when the love shows up, when someone dies,” he said.

“I think it takes something like this, like a suicide, to bring out the love. How sad is that? It takes a suicide to make you cry over a person. Why couldn’t you do it before? Why didn’t you care about it before? Maybe it could have helped.”