

Minding Teen Mental Health



Brittany Goodwin, 19, of White River Junction gives a speech during the second annual Youth Summit at Listen Community Services' community dinner space in White River Junction, on Sept. 27, 2013. (Valley News - Jennifer Hauck)

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Photos are not from original valley news article and have been added from personal camera by Abby Jarvis.

White River Junction — In a matter of minutes, about 50 teens who had been sitting around circular tables at Listen Community Services' River Point Plaza building were all on their feet.

Staff members from the Clara Martin Center had asked them to stand up in phases, each group representing a segment of the population affected by mental illness. Some were supposed to be those who suffer from depression and anxiety, while others represented their friends and family.

The exercise's message, organizer Abby Jarvis told the group Friday morning, was to show that nobody was left sitting in their seats. It was a way to drive home that one person's mental illness also affects those around him or her — and there's nothing wrong with talking about it.



“Whether it be yourself, your friend, your family member, we are all connected to mental health,” said Jarvis, the transition age youth coordinator at Clara Martin, which provide mental health services in the Upper Valley.

“It is important for us to understand this in order to give support and information to those in need, as well as reduce the stigma around this,” Jarvis said. “It’s not something that should be stigmatized, as many are connected to it. It’s time to acknowledge and support it in order for our community to stay healthy.”

Known as the Youth Summit, Clara Martin’s second annual day-long conference for teens provided them the chance to learn about community resources and engage in group discussion related to mental health and intertwined issues, such as alcohol and drug abuse, domestic abuse, sex education, and bullying.

Oxbow High School and Rivendell Academy sent groups of students to the event, while others from Hartford and Thetford high schools got their parents’ OK to take the day off to attend.

The summit seemed particularly important this year, several students and organizers said, as it came in the wake of the suicide deaths of three teenagers with Hartford ties in recent months.

“I really think that it makes it a lot more meaningful, just because if you think about it, the kids that were going through so much obviously didn’t understand that there were people out there that could help them, or they were just too afraid to say anything,” keynote speaker Brittany Goodwin, 19, who graduated from Lebanon High School in 2012, said in an interview. “Even just one suicide is way too much, it’s not OK,

and having all of our groups out in the open, having people come from the schools, they can go back and tell their friends. If they know people that are having a hard time, they can tell them, because they know (the resources).”

Hartford sophomore Brandon DeGraan, a friend of the three teenagers who died, said he felt that the resources and support provided at the summit would help participants know how to respond to a similar crisis.



“They didn’t know what to do, they didn’t have this,” he said of his friends. He believes they felt like they only had one choice to make, but the summit “will give us more decisions (to choose from), people to turn to.”

Listen donated the use of its new building, where teens mingled between Listen’s community dinners space and the suite housing the Junction Teen Life Skills Center, a youth drop-in center that provides a safe place to hangout along with support services and activities.

Students attended four workshops of their choice out of six available, rotating to a new workshop after about a 30-minutes of discussion about a particular topic.

Adam Bindrum, a therapist who works out of Clara Martin’s Randolph offices, hosted a workshop about possible responses and resources to help when teens think they’re friends may be experiencing a crisis.



The workshop invited teens to think about and respond to hypothetical scenarios. Faced with a hypothetical scenario of a friend who's displaying signs of suicidal feelings, one teenager suggested that telling an adult might make things worse because it could just make the friend angrier. But another said she felt that it would be better to have an angry friend than to lose her to suicide.

In between workshops, Bindrum said it's helpful for teens to have thought ahead about different scenarios so that they don't have to make a quick decision "in the moment."

Jarvis, who organized the event with staff from Clara Martin, the Junction and Listen, agreed that the recent string of tragedies underscored the importance of alerting teenagers to the availability of help and resources. Parents and teachers are often the last people to hear when a student is showing signs of a mental struggle, she said, and so it's important to equip teenagers with the tools to respond.

"When it comes to mental health needs and things that kids are dealing with, whether it's suicide or self-harm or drugs and alcohol, the youth are always the first to hear about it," she said. "The youth tell the people closest to them, and that's their peers. ... So we thought it was very important to address that ... we want to support them and let them help their peers."



About a dozen community agencies manned informational booths at the Junction suite in the morning. That gave way to Goodwin's keynote speech, in which she spoke openly of her own difficult teenage years, including her mother's death from a drug overdose when Goodwin was 12, her family's history of drug abuse that led to her own use of substances, shuttling among living arrangements among various

friends and family members, and her arrest, she said, for attempting to kill her former boyfriend



After she received a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and extreme anger, she ultimately received counseling and took advantage of services from the Junction and Clara Martin. She was honored with Vermont's Youth in Transition Young Adult Leadership award and is the lead advocate for Youth Community Rising, a youth advisory board to the state. She chose to share her story, she said afterward, to encourage others to be open about their problems.

"I just wanted them to open up to people, you don't always have to keep it inside, because that's the worst of it, and sharing really does help," she said. "When I used to not talk, I thought I was going to get judged by so many people, and I was nervous to talk to anybody ... but then I realized that I have to talk to people in order to feel better, and to be happy."

Oxbow junior Caleigh Peterson said it was "good to hear (Goodwin's) story" because it set a tone of openness and sharing for the entire event.



"When the speakers are open, it makes you feel like you can be more open with people," she said.

She and classmates Jamie Stevens and Valla Ree Doucette, both sophomores, later attended Bindrum's workshop, and said the workshop and summit on the whole were both valuable and informative. Stevens said it was one of the "first times I've opened up" about some of the issues at hand, while Peterson called it a "secure environment" to ask questions she may not have asked otherwise.

DeGraan, the Hartford sophomore, said that was one of the benefits of the event.

“I think people won’t share stories unless invoked to,” he said. “Because they don’t want to feel different, they don’t want to feel awkward ... and I think this really makes them feel comfortable in their own skin.”

After the workshops, teens enjoyed a pizza lunch, raffled prizes, and an outdoor concert at the bandstand. Jarvis, of Clara Martin, said she hope the event reaches beyond Friday’s participants.

“If anything could happen from this,” she said, “it would just be those kids telling two or more kids, and then those kids telling two or more, and then kind of pyramiding out to letting everyone know that there’s help out there.”

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