



PLAINSBORO: Teen's parents take up cause of suicide prevention

By John Saccenti, Staff Writer

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PLAINSBORO — Kenny Baker was like a lot of students who went to West Windsor-Plainsboro schools. A member of the High School North swim team, Kenny was popular, athletic, and had a close group of friends.

But things changed in March 2006 when he was diagnosed with anxiety disorder. The disorder led to depression and in December 2008 he tried to kill himself.

"He really shouldn't have lived, but did and we were grateful for that," said his mother, Tricia Baker.

Ms. Baker and her husband, Kurt, tried to get their son help. They alerted the school district that they thought he would make another attempt and they attempted to get him to stay an additional year in school before graduating. Just a few months later, May 19, Kenneth S. Baker was found dead shortly after 2 a.m. after being hit by a westbound train.

Almost a full year after Kenny's suicide, his mother and father, of Plainsboro, are still reeling. But they have found a new role and a way to have Kenny's name live on. The Baker family, Tricia, Kurt and their daughter, Caitlyn, have a series of events planned around the anniversary of Kenny's death designed to bring awareness to mental health problems.

"It's the stigma we're trying to battle now. Kenny was this kindhearted young man. We've called this project the Everybody Loves Kenny Project because everybody loved Kenny. He had friends, a girlfriend, was an athlete and excelled at swimming," said Ms. Baker.

Ms. Baker said those with mental health problems, and victims of depression, as well as their families, are often looked at differently, particularly by educators.

"Mental illness is the only disease you are diagnosed with, then criticized for," said Ms. Baker. "There is such a lack of understand of mental health issues among educators. But one in four of our youth suffer from some mental health issue."

"In our district there's so much focus on being the best and brightest," said Ms. Baker. "Our son was very bright. When he was 6 he was tested as having the long-term memory of a 29-year-old, but he did not fit the mold of our current education system and because of that he was judged by our educators."

In addition to a lack of education, the Bakers said that many insurance plans do not cover treatment for the mentally ill.

"We paid \$2,800 a month in medication and doctors. Who can sustain that? Again, there's such a lack of compassion," said Ms. Baker.

But the Bakers did find compassion from friends who have been kind and supportive, through their church and from the National Alliance for Mental Illness, or NAMI, a group the Bakers are working with now.

"We've been working with NAMI, Kurt and I, and our goal is to get the youth involved," said Ms. Baker. "They themselves realize they're missing the youth, they're missing the high school and college students."

That demographic is important, since many people show their first signs of mental illness and depression in their late teens and early 20s. Unfortunately, those signs often go unnoticed.

"The major thing we know is that nine out of 10 suicide survivors were not even aware that they were at risk," said Mr. Baker. Mr. Baker said he hopes kids will learn to reach out and ask for help, even if they are uncomfortable or afraid to do so.

"There are kids who are struggling and are embarrassed. They're afraid and they don't know how to ask for help. They continue to suffer in silence," said Ms. Baker.

The Bakers have a series of events planned around the anniversary of their son's death, which coincidentally, occurred during National Mental Illness/Health Awareness Month. Many of these events are designed as tributes to their son, including a fundraiser at one of his favorite restaurants, Cheeburger, Cheeburger. Customers who mention the charity will have 20 percent of the proceeds of their meal donated to NAMI.

"Kenny loved Cheeburger, Cheeburger. He ate over 50 'pounders.' The owner of Cheeburger, John Lim, always was very

nice to Kenny. He was always very kind and came to the table and always made a fuss," said Ms. Baker.

Another event that is close to the Bakers' hearts is a tree planting and dedication at Community Middle School, where Kenny attended. The event was the idea of the swim team's booster club.

"We all decided that the tree would be best at Community, that is where Kenny thrived. He had his best and happiest years there," said Ms. Baker.

The following is a list of planned local events. May 4, the Capital County Children's Collaborative Resource Fair at 3535 Quakerbridge Road, Suite 500, Hamilton; May 6, National Children's Mental Health Awareness Day; May 19, 2010, Day to Remember Kenny, with an 8 a.m. Mass at Queenship of Mary R.C. Church in Plainsboro; May 19 at 1 a.m. at Community Middle School, a tree dedication donated by the swim team and swim team boosters; May 19, 11 a.m. to 9 p.m., a fundraiser at Cheeburger Cheeburger in Mercer Mall. Have lunch or dinner and 20 percent of the proceeds will go toward NAMI.

On May 22, the month will end with a NAMI walk in Washington Crossing Park, Titusville. Registration begins at 9 a.m. and the walk begins at 10 a.m. Free music begins at 11 a.m. Musical guests include DJ Jon Schedler, Xenia Sky, Michael Glazier with special guest Max Pfister, the [Jeff Palmer Band](#), the Central Fuse and Trentallica. The event will end at 2 p.m. To register, visit www.nami.org/namiwalks10/MER/.

Student volunteers from area high schools are being sought to participate in the walk and to get the word out. To get involved contact Ms. Baker at tricia@everybodyloveskenny.com.

"We have to tell the kids that there is nothing in life worth ending your life for. No matter how much pain you're in you need to talk to someone and ask for help," said Ms. Baker.

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