

# Two youth suicides change a small Oregon town

Heartbreak and loss in Sisters

By ELIZABETH MILLER

Oregon Public Broadcasting

Gabe Willitts loved the outdoors. He had friends all around town in Sisters, where he grew up. He graduated from Sisters High School in 2015 and left town for college in Colorado.

In May, he took his own life. The family was heartbroken. "He was incredible, just an incredible human being," said Bill Willitts, Gabe's grandfather. "Heartful, beautiful."

Bill Willitts is a Sisters institution. His family built the Five Pines Lodge, a hotel near the edge of town. He's been in Sisters for over 20 years, and he and his wife, Zoe, live in an old building that used to belong to the Oregon Department of Forestry.

Soon after Gabe's death, Willitts had dinner with friends who helped out with his grandson's service. They talked about suicide.

"So I said, 'What can we do?' Then we began to do research, and we drew people together," Willitts explained.

Willitts and eight prominent members of the community became Fortitude. The group includes the school district superintendent and an organizer of the Sisters Folk Festival.

The group started meeting, figuring out a way to engage the Sisters community — "from 3 to 93," says Willitts — in efforts to prevent suicide and raise awareness.

Then Galen died. Galen Boles, 22, was from Sisters and a friend of Gabe's.

"We worry about each one of them, we love each one of them," said Willitts. "Galen, I think, underlined (our) worst fear."

Both boys attended Sisters High School, where Fortitude member Heather Johnson is the only health teacher. Over the years, she's seen students struggle.

"Our students are more stressed than they've ever been," said Johnson. "There's just a lot more pressure; there's definitely more and more circumstances of anxiety and depression than I've ever seen — and I've been in this field for 24 years."

Johnson sits in her classroom before her first class of the day. Her efforts to make students comfortable are everywhere. A couch lines one side of the room, and a corner is Johnson's dedicated "hydration station" — full of tea to help



Elizabeth Miller/Oregon Public Broadcasting  
Sisters High School students Sydney and Skylar Wilkins stand with health teacher Heather Johnson, center.



## BREAKING THE SILENCE

News organizations around Oregon are collaborating to bring attention to the problem of suicide, report on populations at highest risk and share resources on how to prevent it.

LEFT Sydney Wilkins holds a card for the 24-hour crisis line — she keeps it in her phone case.

students relax.

As the Sisters community grieved the loss of Gabe and Galen, Johnson says a movement started.

"It was really amazing to see how our schools and how our community, how our churches, how everyone came together and recognized that this is important," said Johnson. "No more, not on our watch, no more."

## 'Brushed under the rug'

For Johnson, this way of openly talking about suicide is new.

"When I think about how I was raised and in my generation, I was raised by my parents and grandparents where you didn't talk about stuff like that," said Johnson. "Anything uncomfortable was always brushed under the rug."

She says that's changing, and conversations around mental health are seen as essential.

"How we've done it all these years is not healthy at all," said Johnson.

There's a countywide

effort to normalize these kinds of conversations.

Whitney Schumacher is the Suicide Prevention Coordinator for Deschutes County. She makes sure communities in her district know about the training and resources available to them.

Deschutes' suicide rate has increased, according to state data. In 2016, the suicide death rate in the county was 17.80 deaths per 100,000 people. One year later, that number was 29 per 100,000.

Schumacher's office is hosting parent nights for students in the county's school districts this year. Unlike similar events two years ago, the new events include information about what to do after a suicide or sudden loss in a community.

"We want to make sure conversation around mental health was normalized — in the home, in schools, in our community," said Schumacher. "We really try to hone in on the fact that there are resources for anybody in Deschutes County in central Oregon."

**WANTED**  
Alder and Maple Saw Logs & Standing Timber  
Northwest Hardwoods • Longview, WA  
Contact: John Anderson • 360-269-2500

There has long been a stigma around mental illness.

"I think that's changing with younger generations," said Schumacher.

But for Sisters High School students, sometimes seeking help in a small town carries its own stigma.

## 'Pressure to be perfect'

Sophomore Skylar Wilkins and her younger sister, freshman Sydney Wilkins, are three-sport athletes at Sisters High. They say an academic schedule and the expectations to do multiple activities adds to the stress.

"You've got to have this laundry list of stuff you do," said Skylar. "It's difficult to do that... but then when you have mental health weighing down on you, that's a big battle that people don't see and people don't count for."

The Wilkins sisters say they feel pressure from constantly comparing themselves to their classmates.

Both Sydney and Skylar talk to their parents about mental health difficulties, and they have friends they can reach out to for support. But Skylar says it can be hard to talk about mental health in a small town.

"News travels because everyone knows everything," said Skylar Wilkins. "There's a certain facade you have to keep up as a student, as a member of the community. It's like, 'We're all normal.'"

The sisters didn't know the two young men who died last year.

But Sisters is small — an old babysitter was Galen's best friend, says Sydney. The losses made her think about the people she did know.

"When something like a suicide happens, you're kind of forced to open your eyes and say this person I care about is struggling," said Sydney. "This is something that could genuinely happen and that's terrifying."

She's been there for friends in crisis. Tucked

inside her phone case, she carries a card with the crisis hotline number.

"I like carrying that around because I know I'm not always going to be able to help this person," explained Sydney. "But it's easier to come to me than to go to someone you don't know."

Fortitude is launching its first initiative this fall, called Sources of Strength. It's a suicide prevention program that will train students to be peer leaders and create campaigns for safe messaging around hope and helping students who may be feeling suicidal.

Bill Willitts wants to build mental health resiliency for kids if they decide to leave home.

"You're going to go out and this world is going to get really difficult — we're going to help you build tools so you're ready," said Willitts.

Fortitude plans to spend the next year working on community outreach, with the goal of figuring out where the community is when it comes to talking about suicide and mental health.

The group worked with the school district superintendent to make sure mental health priorities are equal to academic ones.

It's all a part of Willitts' goal: for Sisters students to develop "tools" starting as early as kindergarten.

"I don't want to see another parent, another grandparent, suffer what we're suffering," Willitts said. "I will forever, as long as my life continues, miss Gabe. I loved him deeply. But what can I do about that? I can help others."

The Classical Series Presents  
**David Shifrin**  
Headliner  
Friday April 26, 7pm  
Tickets \$20/30/40  
Box Office 503-325-5922 x55  
www.libertyastoria.org

LIBERTY THEATRE  
ASTORIA OREGON

THE DAILY ASTORIAN



# TV SCHEDULE

Evening listings  
TUESDAY

TUESDAY EVENING												APRIL 9	
A	L	6 PM	6:30	7 PM	7:30	8 PM	8:30	9 PM	9:30	10 PM	10:30	11 PM	11:30
2	KATU	(2) News (N)	News (N)	Jeopardy! (N)	Wheel of Fortune	Am.Housewife (N)	Kids-Alright (N)	Black-ish (N)	Splitting (SF) (N)	The Rookie "The Checklist" (N)	News (N)	(3:55) Jimmy Kimmel	
3	KOMO	(4) KOMO 4 News at 6pm	Wheel of Fortune	Jeopardy! (N)	Am.Housewife (N)	Kids-Alright (N)	Black-ish (N)	Splitting (SF) (N)	The Rookie "The Checklist" (N)	KOMO4News (N)	(3:55) Jimmy Kimmel		
4	KING	(5) NBC News (N)	KING 5 News (N)	KING 5 News (N)	Evening	The Voice "The Battles Part Four" (N)	The Village "Heart on Fire" (N)	New Amsterdam "Sanctuary" (N)	KING 5 News/ 11 (N)	(3:55) Tonight Show			
5	KOIN	(6) News (N)	Evening News (N)	Extra	Ent. Tonight (N)	NCIS "Perennial" (N)	The Code "Blowed Up" (P) (N)	NCIS: New O. "A House Divided" (N)	KOIN News/ 11 (N)	(3:55) Colbert			
6	KIRO	(7) KIRO 7 News (N)	Evening News (N)	KIRO 7 News (N)	Ent. Tonight (N)	NCIS "Perennial" (N)	The Code "Blowed Up" (P) (N)	NCIS: New O. "A House Divided" (N)	KIRO News (N)	(3:55) Colbert			
7	KGW	(8) KGW News at 6:00 p.m. (N)	Tonight Cassidy	Inside Edition	The Voice "The Battles Part Four" (N)	The Village "Heart on Fire" (N)	New Amsterdam "Sanctuary" (N)	News (N)	[Friends]	Two and a Half	Two and a Half		
8	KRCW	(3) Modern Family	Modern Family	The Goldbergs	The Flash "King Shark vs. Gorilla Grodd"	Roswell "Champagne Supernova" (N)	News (N)	[Friends]	Two and a Half	Two and a Half			
9	KOPB	(10) Ask-Old House	Business (N)	PBS NewsHour (N)	Finding/ Roots "All in the Family" (N)	Reconstruction: Amer (P) (N)	Reconstruction: Amer (N)	Reconstruction: Amer (N)	Colorado's National				
10	KPTV	(12) 6 O'Clock News (N)	Family Feud	Family Feud	Chef "Quacking Under Pressure" (N)	Mental Samurai "Week Four" (N)	10 O'Clock News (N)	News (N)	Page Six TV				
11	KPDx	(2) Mike & Molly	Mike & Molly	Big Bang Theory	Big Bang Theory	8pm Prime News (N)	Big Bang Theory	Family Guy	American Dad!	The Game			
12	KCPQ	(13) Modern Family	Modern Family	Big Bang Theory	Big Bang Theory	Chef "Quacking Under Pressure" (N)	Mental Samurai "Week Four" (N)	Q13 NEWS AT 10 (N)	News (N)	The Simpsons			
13	TBS	(20) Family Guy	Family Guy	Big Bang Theory	Big Bang Theory	Big Bang Theory	Big Bang Theory	The Last O.G. (N)	Conan (N)	The Last O.G.			
14	KZJL	(22) Black-ish	Black-ish	Mom	Modern Family	Mom	Modern Family	Q13 News at 9 (N)	Big Bang Theory	Big Bang Theory	Two and a Half	Two and a Half	
15	ESPN	(29) (5:00) MLB Baseball	New York Yankees at Houston Astros (L)	Mom	Modern Family	Mom	Modern Family	SportsCenter (N)	SportsCenter (N)	SportsCenter (N)	SportsCenter (N)	SportsCenter (N)	
16	ESPN2	(30) (5:30) Tiger Woods: Return of the Roar	Madden Bowl (N)	NFL Live				The Ariel Helwani MMA Show (N)	Boxing Top Rank	Now or Never (N)	UFC Flashback		
17	NICK	(31) The Loud House	The Loud House	The Loud House	Henry Danger	SpongeBob	SpongeBob	SpongeBob	The Office	The Office	Friends	Friends	
18	DISN	(32) Coop & Cami	Coop & Cami	Raven's Home	Raven's Home	Sydney to the Max	Coop & Cami	Jessie	Jessie	Sydney to the Max	Coop & Cami	Andi Mack	Sydney Max
19	FAM	(34) (5:30) *** Pitch Perfect ("12, Com)	Brittany Snow, Rebel Wilson, Anna Kendrick.	Bold Type "The New Normal" (SP) (N)	Law, Rose Byrne, Melissa McCarthy.	*** 13 Going on 30 (2004, Comedy)	Mark Ruffalo, Judy Greer, Jennifer Garner.	*** The Internship (2013, Comedy)	Owen Wilson, Rose Byrne, Vince Vaughn.	(5:50) FXM Presents			
20	LIFE	(36) Grey's Anatomy "Take the Lead"	Married "Doomed or Devoted?"	Unlocked "The End of the Beginning"	Married at First Sight "Finale Reunion" (SF) (N)	(3:55) Married at First Sight "Finale Reunion"							
21	ROOT	(38) (5:00) MLB Baseball	Seattle Mariners at Kansas City Royals (L)	Post-game	MLB Baseball Seattle Mariners at Kansas City Royals Site: Kauffman Stadium -- Kansas City, Mo.	[Post-game]							
22	FS1	(39) (4:30) NCAA Baseball	Creighton vs. Nebraska (L)	MLB Whiparound (L)	PBC Face to Face	TMZ Sports (N)	Fair Game	Skip and Shannon: Undisputed Opinions on the biggest sports topics of the day.					
23	SPIKE	(43) Mom	Mom	Mom	Mom	*** Eagle Eye (2008, Action)	Billy Bob Thornton, Michelle Monaghan, Shia LaBeouf.	Tosh.0	Tosh.0	Tosh.0 (N)	Jim Jefferies (N)	Savages ("12, Cri) Aaron Taylor-Johnson.	
24	COM	(44) The Office	The Office	The Office	The Office	Tosh.0	Tosh.0	Tosh.0	Tosh.0	Tosh.0 (N)	Jim Jefferies (N)	The Daily Show (N) Tosh.0	
25	HIST	(45) Curse of Oak Island "Clue or False?"	The Curse of Oak Island "Heavy Metal"	Oak Island "Striking Distance" (N)	The Curse of Oak Island (N)	(05) Lost Gold of World War II (N)	(05) The Toe Bro "Reptile Skin" (N)	(05) The Toe Bro "Reptile Skin" (N)	(05) The Toe Bro "Reptile Skin" (N)	(05) The Toe Bro "Reptile Skin" (N)	(05) The Toe Bro "Reptile Skin" (N)	(05) The Toe Bro "Reptile Skin" (N)	
26	A&E	(46) The First 48 "Officer Down"	Hoarders "Leza and Linda"	Hoarders: Then & "Sandra" Sandra hoarded the home she lost to foreclosure. (N)	L.P. "Happy Birthday Jackson" (N)	People "Welcome Home, Murphy!" (N)	7 Little Johnstons (N)	Sextuplets "We're Having SIX-tuplets"	Goldrush "Dozer Dave Returns" (P) (N)	The Story of God "Holy Laws"			
27	TLC	(47) Say Yes-Dress	Say Yes-Dress	Say Yes to the Dress	Deadliest Catch "Blood and Water"	Deadliest Catch "At the End"	Deadliest Catch Follows the daily lives of Alaskan crab fishermen. (SP) (N)	Lost/Treasure "Curse of the Afterlife" (N)	NBA Basketball Boston Celtics at Washington Wizards				
28	DISC	(48) Deadliest Catch "No Safe Harbor"	Deadliest Catch "Blood and Water"	The Story of God "Who Is God?"	The Story of God "Divine Secrets"	The Story of God "Holy Laws"	Inside the NBA (L)	NBA Basketball Boston Celtics at Washington Wizards					
29	NGEO	(49) The Story of God "A Higher Power"	The Story of God "Who Is God?"	The Story of God "Divine Secrets"	The Story of God "Holy Laws"	Inside the NBA (L)	NBA Basketball Boston Celtics at Washington Wizards						
30	TNT	(50) (4:00) NBA Basketball	NBA Basketball Houston Rockets at Oklahoma City Thunder Site: Chesapeake Energy Arena (L)	*** Tombstone (1993, Western)	Val Kilmer, Michael Biehn, Kurt Russell.								
31	AMC	(51) (4:00) *** Scarface (1983, Crime Story)	Michelle Pfeiffer, Steven Bauer, Al Pacino.	*** Tombstone (1993, Western)	Val Kilmer, Michael Biehn, Kurt Russell.								
32	USA	(52) Law & Order: S.V.U. "Lessons Learned"	Law & Order: S.V.U. "Dreams Deferred"	WWE Super Smackdown	Chopped "Sensational Sandwiches"	Chopped "You've Got Snail" (N)	Miz & Mrs. (N)	[Chris Lynch]	(05) Modern Fam	(3:55) Modern Fam			
33	FOOD	(53) Chopped	Chopped	Rehab "Lincoln Park Fourplex"	Restored Fords (N)   Restored Fords (N)	One of a Kind (N)	House Hunters (N)	House Hunters (N)	House Hunters (N)	House Hunters (N)	House Hunters (N)	House Hunters (N)	
34	HGTV	(54) Fixer Upper	Fixer Upper	*** The Girl on the Train (2016, Mystery)	Rebecca Ferguson, Haley Bennett, Emily Blunt.	Anderson Cooper 360	Tucker Carlson Tonight	The Profit: My Roots	The Profit	Paid Program	Paid Program		
35	FX	(56) (5:00) Passengers ("16, Adv)	Chris Pratt, Jennifer Lawrence.	CNN Tonight With Don Lemon	The Ingraham Angle	Fox News @ Night	The Profit: My Roots	The Profit	Paid Program	Paid Program			
36	CNN	(57) Cuomo Prime Time	Hannity	CNN Tonight With Don Lemon	The Ingraham Angle	Fox News @ Night	The Profit: My Roots	The Profit	Paid Program	Paid Program			
37	FNC	(58) Hannity	The Ingraham Angle	CNN Tonight With Don Lemon	The Ingraham Angle	Fox News @ Night	The Profit: My Roots	The Profit	Paid Program	Paid Program			
38	NCBC	(61) The Profit: My Roots (N)	The Profit	The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills	Beverly Hills (N)	[MexicanDynasties "Tres Is a Crowd" (N)]	Watch What (N)	Beverly Hills					
39	BRVH	(63) Beverly Hills "Fifty Shades of Shade"	Beverly "Eat, Drink and Be Married"	The Gay Falcon ("41) George Sanders.	The Gay Falcon ("41) George Sanders.	*** Meet Boston Blackie ("41) Chester Morris.	*** Footsteps in the Dark ("41) Errol Flynn.						
40	TCM	(64) Movie	*** The Saint in New York ("38) Kay Sutton, Louis Hayward.	The Gay Falcon ("41) George Sanders.	The Gay Falcon ("41) George Sanders.	*** Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (2005, Adventure)	Emma Watson, Rupert Grint, Daniel Radcliffe.						
41	SYFY	(65) *** Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban (2004, Fantasy)	Emma Watson, Rupert Grint, Daniel Radcliffe.	Best of America	Rural Eve. News	Ag PhD	Cattlemen to Cattlemen	FFA Today	FFA Today	FFA Today	FFA Today	FFA Today	
42	RFD	(62) (5:30) Cattlemen (N)	FFA Today (N)	Chris Cox	Ken McNabb	Best of America	Rural Eve. News	Ag PhD	Cattlemen to Cattlemen	FFA Today	FFA Today	FFA Today	