

Participants walk to save lives, comfort survivors

By Nicole Montesano

Smoke Signals staff writer

Wearing beads of every color to honor loved ones lost and those still struggling, residents of Salem and the surrounding areas braved the threat of rain Saturday, Oct. 11, to walk from Riverfront Park across the Willamette River, share their stories and help raise awareness to prevent suicide.

Tribal adults and youth from the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde attended the annual Out of Darkness Walk, as they do every year, hoping to remind fellow Tribal members they do not have to suffer in alone and in silence.

“The reason why I came to the walk is that suicide prevention is a very important thing, so the ones we love don’t despair or hurt themselves, because we love them, and we don’t want them gone,” 15-year-old Tribal youth Satara Blanchard said.

Despite the forecast, the weather remained dry for the duration of the event.

Speakers for the event talked about their own struggles and the importance of talking openly about concerns.

“Talk saves lives,” Vuong Tran,



Photo by Nicole Montesano

Vuong Tran, board chair of the Oregon Chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, addresses the crowd at the Out of the Darkness Walk at Riverfront Park in Salem Saturday, Oct. 11.

board chair of the Oregon Chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, told the crowd.

It’s also the name of one of the organization’s programs.

“Talk Saves Lives tells you that if someone you love is thinking about

suicide, one of the best things you can do is directly ask them about it,” Tran said. “While some people worry that asking about suicide will increase suicide risk, research suggests that asking someone directly about suicide actually decreases suicide risk. So, don’t be afraid to ask the question, ‘Are you thinking about ending your life?’ If they tell you they are thinking of suicide, well, listen and have an open and honest conversation about that. And offer to help them find help.”

He added, “If you don’t know what to do at that time, you can always text or call the number 988 and you can do that on behalf of the person or you can do that for yourself, to figure out how to support that person.”

Attending the walk, Tran said, is also important, telling the crowd that, “You are helping provide support to the many people who have suffered loss.”

In acknowledgement of the fact, organizers perform a small ceremony every year, asking people to hold up their honor beads for different types of losses to suicide: White for loss of a child; red for loss of a spouse or partner; gold for loss of a parent; orange for loss of a sibling; purple for loss of a friend or relative; silver for loss of a first responder or military member; green for a personal attempt or struggle; teal or supporting someone who is struggling; blue for supporting the cause generally and rainbow for honoring the LGBTQ community.

Many people wore multiple strands in various colors, noting the complexity of the issue. The beads, which are given out at the event, are intended to show people that they are not alone in their loss and help them reach out to connect with each other.

Oregon police officer Cody Mann, who served in the military in Afghanistan, told the audience it was devastating for him to learn that two of his unit’s most admired leaders had taken their own lives.

After hearing about the death by suicide of his sergeant a few years ago, Mann said, he considered ending his own life.

“I’d recently gone through a divorce, not being able to see my son as often as I wanted; I was upside down on my house, I was working full-time in law enforcement,” he said. “My instant thought for me was that if a man that I revered as much as Bryce had made this decision, how could I ever possibly be successful in my own life? I remember a week later sitting in my empty house with bare walls, mattress on the floor, at the foot of my bed, contemplating my own end. I did not see any way out of the depression I had got myself in. Had it not been for my dog incessantly pressing her cold, wet nose in my face, licking my tears away, likely I would not be standing in front of you today.”

The following morning, Mann said, “I went to the VA and sought help. I went through a year-long therapy program and at the end of it, I found myself with a level of confidence that I had never possessed before.”

But, he said, his job continued to take a toll on him, taking him away from special family moments and sometimes placing him in danger. While he was struggling professionally, he said, his grandfather and mother both passed away. And then came the second call: His platoon commander, “the man who I wished to emulate in life” had also been lost to suicide.

Struggling to speak through tears, Mann said that “By the grace of the Lord and the support of a loving wife, I took a different path in my reaction in dealing with this.”

He created a class called “Battle Buddy Resilience” that he teaches with the International Law Enforcement Educators and Trainers Association, to help law enforcement officers survive their struggles with suicidal thoughts.

“I did this because I found that the thing missing in almost all these instances, with my mentors, myself, friends and other people who might find themselves in this situation, we will oftentimes do everything but reach out to one another generally asking for help, from a friend or a loved one or even a professional,” Mann said. “So, my parting message for you here today is not just for you but for others in your life ... to break the taboo of suicide in your life and talk to someone. You are loved and you are needed.”

Grand Ronde Tribal member Kiah Runningbird said she was attending the walk for the second time. She said she has lost an uncle and a cousin to suicide.

“Mental health is really important, especially in my family,” Runningbird said. “I’ve personally lost two people. I walk to honor the family members I’ve lost and to be out here with other members of our community. I advocate for staying away from drugs and getting help. Don’t just bottle it up in there; you’ve gotta talk to somebody.”

Blanchard said it was her third time walking.

“Making sure people know about these resources is really important, so we don’t lose the ones that we love,” she said. “I (attend) as often as I can.” ■

Help available for people struggling with suicidal thoughts

Help is available for people struggling with suicidal thoughts. Crisis lines and hotlines are available free of charge, and several offer culturally informed assistance.

The 988 Suicide and Crisis line is a national hotline for both people in crisis and those who want to help someone in crisis. It is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week and offers English and Spanish. Press option four to be connected with a team of Native specialists familiar with intergenerational trauma and traditional cultural care. There is also a TTY line at 1-800-799-4TTY (4889).

Native youth may also text “NATIVE” to 741741 for assistance from trained crisis counselors. Service is available 24/7.

From 5 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily, the StrongHearts Native HelpLine at 844-762-8483 provides anonymous culturally appropriate helpline for domestic violence, sexual and dating violence.

Crisis Text Line is a national texting service for emotional crisis support. Text HELLO to 741741. The line is available 24/7.

In addition, YouthLine offers teen-to-teen crisis help, with phone and texting available. Teens respond from 4 to 10 p.m. Monday through Friday Pacific Time, while adults are available by phone at all other times. Call 877-968-8491, or text teen2teen to 839863. Email teen2teen@linesforlife.org.

Yamhill County also offers a 24/7 crisis hotline, at 844-842-8200. In addition, it offers suicide prevention training at no cost to county residents. For more information, visit hhs.co.yamhill.or.us/633/Suicide-Prevention-Trainings.

People who need assistance specific to veterans may call the Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255, 24/7. Press one or text 838255. It is not necessary to be enrolled in Veterans Administration benefits or health care.

There are also crisis services available 24/7 for LGBTQSIA people through The Trevor Project at 866-488-7386 or by texting START to 678678. People also may call TransLifeline at 1-877-565-8860.

Warning signs of suicide may include the following:

- Talking about wanting to die
- Looking for a way to kill oneself
- Talking about feeling helpless or having no purpose
- Talking about feeling trapped or unbearable pain
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Increasing use of alcohol or drugs
- Acting anxious, agitated or reckless
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings

Steps to take include removing any firearms, alcohol, drugs and sharp objects, not leaving the person alone, calling 988 and taking the person to an emergency room or seeking help from a medical or mental health professional. ■