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EDITORIAL

Breaking the silence on suicide

That 825 Oregonians died in a single year by suicide is a sobering assessment of our collective ability to help those who feel trapped in their own despair.

That it's such a hidden statistic, however, is an embarrassing reflection of our collective ignorance. Hundreds more people died by suicide in Oregon in 2017 than by traffic crashes, firearms or drug overdose. The suicide rate in Oregon is well above the national average, as it has been for the past three decades. Yet this undeniable public health issue has lacked the public attention and sustained outcry that it desperately needs.

Some of that stems from the stigma that persists around mental illness and suicide, shutting off conversation or even acknowledgment that a suicide has

occurred. Some may stem from the fear of encouraging "copycat" behavior. Regardless of the motivation, however, our families, schools, communities and media organizations have too often chosen the easy way out by simply keeping silent. Meanwhile, the suicide rate in Oregon and the United States has continued to climb.

Clearly, silence hasn't worked. This week, news organizations around the state are collaborating to bring attention to the problem of suicide, report on populations at highest risk and share resources on how to prevent it. While the "Breaking the Silence" project won't necessarily provide answers, it aims to start a statewide effort to confront it. Using responsible reporting practices that examine, not sensational-

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ize, suicide, these stories can provide the common understanding, motivation, tools and questions that can help the community mobilize against this public health threat.

The data show just how widespread a problem this is. Oregon's suicide rate is 14th highest in the country and suicide is the second leading cause of death for those ages 10 to 34, according to the Oregon Health Authority. One fifth of those who kill themselves are veterans. More than half the deaths are caused by

firearms.

While those statistics may seem daunting, they can also provide possible avenues where leaders can make a difference. Such data, in the aggregate, can help build support for increased funding for veterans' health services or provide tangible prevention options, such as the 2017 law that allows family members and police officers to petition a court to take away firearms from someone at risk for suicide or causing harm to others.

We also need to recog-

nize that Oregon's youth are struggling. Nearly 9 percent of eighth-graders self-reported having tried to kill themselves one or more times in the previous year and nearly double that percentage considered it, according to Oregon Health Authority data. That children just entering their teen years would even think of suicide as an option should be its own open-and-shut case for more counseling, support and training in schools. And health officials can lead by providing guidance for families, schools, health departments, physicians and nonprofits on how to talk about suicide both as a general public health issue and on an individual basis.

This is not an insurmountable problem. Resources already exist and show that crisis counseling lines and other outreach

efforts make a difference. Even friends and family members can take steps to help a loved one who is struggling by asking a series of questions about whether they have wished they were dead, thought about killing themselves or made any plans toward killing themselves. But it requires the willingness to have those uncomfortable conversations in the first place.

The effects of suicide reach far beyond the individual. The injury is borne by families, friends, communities and the public at large. It's long past time to start treating it that way.

This editorial, written by the editorial board of The Oregonian, is running in newspapers around the state this week as part of Breaking the Silence, a collaborative effort to address suicide in a productive way.

GUEST COLUMN

Choose to continue the sentence; to stay and fight another day

I used to consider the semicolon the unwanted child of punctuation. It is usually misused or mistakenly typed on the keyboard if you forgot to hold shift while pressing for the colon button. In writing, semicolons are used when the author could have used a period but chooses to connect clauses for a longer, more interesting sentence. But now, the semicolon has become greater than a simple punctuation mark.

The semicolon changed for me when I saw a picture of it in a friend's room. I asked her what it stood for, and she replied, "It's when an author could've chosen to end their sentence, but chose to continue instead." I fell silent, working out the reasoning behind her words.

She then told me her story starting with her middle school friend. They would draw semicolons on their wrists with eyeliner (so it wouldn't smudge off) as a reminder of hope for their life's hardships. She suffers from ADHD which causes her to have anxiety; she has also experienced depression. I realized then that it related to survival and hope.

That same day, I drew myself a picture of a semicolon and hung it on my wall. Her story and the simple drawing of that semicolon changed my entire view of the unwanted child of punctuation; I was left with a yearning to learn more.



Ericka Wells

I discovered that there is a movement called Project Semicolon. Amy Bleuel started this non-profit organization after she lost her father to suicide. Since 2013, this movement has helped over 5.2 million people. They follow the quote my friend shared with me: "A semicolon is used when an author could've chosen to end their sentence, but chose not to. The author is you, and the sentence is your life." Project Semicolon's website holds valuable articles and resources for anyone experiencing depression, suicidal thoughts, loneliness, and/or other mental diseases, and seeks to help with every struggle.

From this movement, tattoos of semicolons have spread like wildfire. These tattoos come in all different forms, from simple to extravagant pieces of art; there is no limit to the creativ-

ity. Many tattoos I've seen are with words like "cont:nue," or "warr;or," or "surv;ve." But the most impactful tattoo I've seen is a heartbeat that goes flat, but at the end, there is a semicolon, and the heartbeat returns to normal. It shows that they tried to end their (life) sentence and start another one (death), but they decided to fight and survive another day.

The semicolon has taken on many different meanings. For some, it's in remembrance of a loved one; for others, it is a symbol of hope, optimism, support, and/or survival. It symbolizes strength, where people can rise from their ashes like a phoenix and become stronger and beautiful once again.

For me, I see hope and inspiration to achieve my dreams and goals. Every time I look at the semicolon on my wall, I feel inspired to keep pushing through the day and have confidence that everything will work out in the end. But more importantly, I know that the semicolon is more than punctuation.

Ericka Wells is a student at Hermiston High School and an aspiring author writing her own book series.

GUEST COLUMN

Losses affect students who are left behind

I don't think it's an exaggeration when I say that my class has gone through a lot.

I never thought this would be something I'd experience. When I think about it now, I never thought I'd experience it this much.

From the moment I've started high school, my class has experienced the loss of a classmate at least once every year.

It's a strange day when it happens. I remember the feeling each time right before we were told. Usually, we see some important staff member walk in with a single piece of paper. Now, my class has grown to despise this piece of paper because it's the same thing each year now. Anytime we see one of the staff members walk in with that familiar demeanor, we already know what is about to happen. We are told that this isn't normal. The saddest part about that is that it's become our new normal; we now expect it to happen each year.

Parents of students who have been going through this may have a hard time understanding it. They may not know what is going through their child's mind. Don't worry, because we don't know either. I can barely find the words to write about it. The kind of effect

this has had on us is weird. There are some days when we think we see someone around school, but then we remember that they passed earlier that year or even longer ago. We also think about the last



Karyssa Fisher

time we saw one of our classmates, and how not long after that they were gone.

Some of us live with regret. That goes hand in hand with replaying all the times we've seen the ones we've lost. We wish we could have said something, or that we may have treated them better. We wish we reached out more. It's all we think about. And eventually, the ones we lost find their way into our dreams. Then we find ourselves waking up the next morning with a jolt, not being able to think clearly the rest of the day.

My class graduates next year. I think about this part a lot because I know that this would be something that is bound to come up.

When we're up there thinking about how we made it, we'll also be thinking about the ones who didn't.

We will carry our memory of them with us for a long time.

Karyssa Fisher is a junior at Hermiston High School.

PET OF THE WEEK

Alvin is a work in progress. He is the last of the hoard situation and the most unsocialized. He needs the right person to give him the chance to get to know him and his amazing personality. No children.



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