

community

Moms unite after losing children to suicide

Blaine mothers turn anguish into hope that change can help youth struggling with mental health disorders

by Jim Boyle
Editor

Shannon Lee and Janet Casperson hardly knew each other until their lives collided in the midst of tragedies.

Lee's daughter Ashlyn and Casperson's son Sam began dating while Sam was quietly struggling with the deaths of two of his buddies who had completed suicides.

Sam was a witty, polite and outdoorsy 16-year-old junior at Blaine High School who liked to fish, loved animals and had been a Boy Scout all while growing up in Blaine.

Ashlyn, a 16-year-old girl who paused for sunrises and sunsets and was known for the kindness she brought into world, genuinely believed simple acts of kindness could change a person's day for the better. Little notes, reaching out to those in trouble, and silly laughter could create a positive ripple. The Blaine girl, who attended Spring Lake Park High School, wanted nothing more than to help her boyfriend.

Sam was not a big talker or someone who liked to share his feelings. On doctor's advice, he tried counseling, but he opened up little and the help wasn't enough to quell the pain of depression.

"Sam never wanted to admit he was struggling," Casperson said. "It's OK to not be OK and to be able to talk about it openly."

Lee said of her daughter: "Ashlyn wanted to be there for Sam. She wishes she could have helped him and prevented him from taking his life."

But on Jan. 2, 2020, Sam completed a suicide. Ashlyn's world unraveled and she completed her own suicide attempt about six weeks later. Their deaths were among 14 suicides in 2019 and 2020 among teens in the north metro in towns like Blaine, Spring Lake Park and St. Francis. In Minnesota, there were 723 suicides in

2020, including 48 involving teenagers.

As the two women and their families tried to come to grips with their realities and to pick up the pieces, they concluded that the face of suicide needs to be more public.

"These were smiling kids, not the face of suicide that you would expect," Lee said. "They were seemingly happy."

Lee, 46, and Casperson, 42, both of whom work in health care, have decided, rather than curl up into the fetal position, they have joined forces. They have begun speaking out, and they are pressing the Anoka-Hennepin School District to do more for kids who are struggling with mental health disorders.

Lee, a radiologist, is keeping the memory of Ashlyn alive with a kindness campaign called Ashlyn's Ripple.

She and Casperson have also joined an effort to hold social media more accountable when it comes to anonymous chat rooms, and they testified at the Minnesota State Capitol in favor of a digital well-being bill, which passed the Minnesota Legislature this spring, that was pushed by a group called Live More Screen Less.

The duo is also making waves in places like the Anoka-Hennepin School District, where they say the ratio of mental health professionals to students is abysmal, and programming to help struggling youth is absent.

The need for more and better resources was painfully obvious, they said, in the wake of their children's deaths. To make matters worse, an offer of professional mental health services was turned away, they said.

Meanwhile, they have taken their concerns to other groups like the North Metro Chamber of Commerce, who hosted a presentation by the Lee and Casperson titled the "Faces of Suicide."

"Our kids were goofy," Lee said. "They loved to joke around and had funny personalities and were always trying to make people laugh."

"They were good kids. They came from families who loved them and cared for them. They didn't have a terrible family life. They were very respectful kids, not ones you would consider troubled by any means. That's tough."

The two women say they are constantly being contacted by friends of their kids, parents of kids who knew them and parents and others who know of their losses and want to find help for their own struggling teens. These people also want to know how they could help in the fight to raise mental health awareness and prevent suicides from happening.

The answer was hidden in their grief, but it came to light in the form of a Cheer Bag sponsored by the Thumbs Up High 5K organization in Elk River. Katie Shatusky, one of the co-founders of the organization, happens to be neighbor to the aunt of one of Ashlyn's best friends. Shatusky presented Ashlyn's friend with a Cheer Bag. It sparked a conversation, but little else at the time.

"We were just trying to figure out how to function," Lee said. "We got to a point where someone would reach out to us every single day on our Facebook or Instagram account to see if we could help them or they could help do something themselves."

"The number of people Sam and Ashlyn touched was so huge," Casperson said. "What do we do?"

That's when the Cheer Bag and a previous conversation came up again. They turned to Shatusky and asked what could they do on a different level to share their stories to be helpful.

"We want to turn these extremely negative outcomes into something positive," Lee said. "We recognize a need within our schools and community."

Casperson nodded in agreement.

"What we are doing is therapeutic for me," Casperson said. "It sucks that we lost our kids and nothing will ever bring them back. But what we are doing to make changes and get it talked about more is a huge thing."

Thumbs Up has made it possible for many people of various ages to talk more openly about mental health, including youngsters attending school in the Elk River Area School District and at Spectrum Middle and High School. Thumbs Up has provided funds for speakers, programs, and scholarships for students pursuing careers in mental health related fields, and helped create spaces in schools that normalize discussions about mental health and with professionals.

"Seeing what Katie has done in Elk River is so amazing," Lee said. "Why can't every community school district have an open mind to offer things to their kids?"

Both Janet Casperson



Submitted photos

Janet Casperson (left) and Shannon Lee became close after their children completed suicides, and now they are a team hoping to raise awareness of mental health disorders and suicide prevention in Anoka County area schools.



Sam Casperson (second in from the left) was among the pictures at Woodland Trails Regional Park of people who lost their battles with depression and completed suicides.

and Shannon Lee formed a team for the Thumbs Up 5K, and between 135 members of Team Ashlyn's Ripple and 80 members of Team Sam Casperson they raised more than \$26,000. They have also joined the committee that planned the event.

Both said they were blown away by the event. "From the moment I stepped off the bus there was a vibe about this 5K," Lee said. "There was a warmth about it, and a feeling of belonging."

What touched Lee's heart most was the walking along the clothesline to see the faces of those people lost to suicide.

"I made a point to look at every single face," Lee said. "They're all beautiful, smiling faces. They should be here, I thought. It was striking to see all those faces. It isn't right. They should still be here."

Both Lee and Casperson are hyped to help even more next year with the Thumbs Up 5K. The pair



Ashlyn Lee (on the left) was also among the pictures of people who have completed suicides. Nearly 1,000 people participated in this year's Thumbs Up 5K in Elk River.

will be part of a panel soon that will address health classes at Elk River High School. They also now need to circle back with the Live More Screen Less group to learn more and help them. They are focused on issues ranging from cyberbullying to mental health awareness.

They will renew efforts to reach school administrators about what can be done in places like the Anoka-Hennepin School District, where it can take two weeks to see a school counselor — and that's not even someone trained in mental health, the two said. They will be pushing for access to mental health professionals in the schools, and they have more support behind them to make a push.

"We feel this army of people behind us that have been asking us what can they do," Casperson said. The support is critical, because grief still hangs around the shoulders of both Lee and Casperson like a heavy coat. "Every day is super hard," Lee said. "It sucks. I cry at some point every single day."

"Ashlyn was someone who wanted to change the world. She would write about being kind and doing good. She's not here to do those things, but I want to try my best to carry out that beautiful light and spirit she had that she would shine on people and affect them in that way."

To do that, Lee will keep up Ashlyn's Ripple Facebook site, encouraging kindness and inspiring words to keep the legacy of her daughter alive. It was Ashlyn who introduced her mom to 5Ks for causes ranging from autism to Down syndrome.

Lee and Casperson will be forever tied to the cause of mental health education and suicide prevention.

"Most of all we will keep talking and speaking out," Casperson said. "These things need to be talked about. Mental health needs to be made a priority."



Team Sam Casperson, about 80 people in size, and Team Ashlyn's Ripple, 135 members in all, helped grow participation to record numbers at the eighth annual Thumbs Up High 5K.

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