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Who Better Than Teens To Advise Teens?

This week, another Santa Rosa teenager decided to commit suicide, this time by jumping off a 30-foot bridge on Fountain Grove Parkway. A government report says teen suicides have just taken the biggest jump in 15 years. As the hopeless girl was about to join statistics, adults below paced in circles wondering, "What in God's name could have gone so wrong?"

It feels like no one is listening.

Most adults have no clue how their high expectations, our daily school pressures, social rejection and drama are enough to make any teenager look for the nearest ledge out. Our parents tell us we should "try harder" so we can be their idea of us. Meanwhile, at school, if you're not funny, skinny or "hot" you don't exist. The pressure to have sex is crazy. Born gay and that's who you are? You'd better not tell anyone. Don't do drugs or even drink? You're a loser. And, after you've confided in your so-called "best friend," you realize she's blabbed your most personal secrets. You can't take it anymore. And, it's no joke.

A popular senior at our high school most people have recently heard of seemed to have everything. Straight A's, already accepted into college and great parents. Everyone around him saw so much good about his life. But he didn't. Without talking to a single soul about it, he crept into his family's garage and hanged himself. His indescribable sadness now hangs in the hearts of his family and friends.

Not long ago, a small group of us was trolling through some of our friends' MySpace blogs. Even we were stunned by their detailed descriptions of horrific experiences they expressed like being raped by a step dad, nearly dying from a drug overdose and one bullied girl's account of cutting her entire body to have some sense of control over her pain. We knew these were serious cries for help no one would hear. Parents think they know what their teens are thinking and doing on the Internet, but they don't. The bad thing is, the secret cyber wall we create and hide behind keeps us locked in low self-esteem, shame and fear.

One in five teenagers has not only “considered” killing themselves, they’ve actually pictured in their minds how to do it. The girl on the bridge fought her rescuer but was saved. Still, police told us she’ll probably keep trying until she succeeds. She had deep scars on her wrists. No family support. And, local mental health care for teens is virtually unavailable.

We can't let her or any more of us go.

There is an answer. A broadcast organization called “YouthVoice” hopes to become “The Most Trusted Source of Support and Information for Teenagers.” It’s going to work because it’s so different. We know teenagers are influenced more by peers than by anyone else. So why not train teenagers to counsel other teens and get them talking about what’s really going on with them? Why and how does it hurt? What about all the good things about you we tend to overlook? And where to turn for services that are truly helpful to teenagers.

YouthVoice has many shows that educate, inspire and entertain. But, it started here in the Bay Area with us asking some of our favorite teachers to educate a group of teen peer counselors on sensitive topics like suicide, drug addiction, parent conflict, rape and responsible money handling. Every week for a year, our teens from Elsie Allen, Maria Carrillo, Montgomery, Piner, Santa Rosa, Ursuline and Roseland Prep high schools studied addictions, eating disorders, suicide, rape, bullying, money all things affecting teens. Some well-known TV broadcasters taught us how to host TV and Radio shows so we can reach teens across the country. Chop’s Teen Center became our home base and got other agencies to join us.

We hired a top counselor to start a weekly teen/parent conflict resolution group. We asked The Santa Rosa School District to let us help teach its eleventh grade Life Skills course and focus on topics that apply to teens’ real lives. State Farm Insurance committed to being our premiere sponsor.

MIX 104.9 FM radio station signed us to host a show on Sunday nights. KRCB-TV Channel 22 committed to our pilot TV show. Local papers like our Teen Advice Columns. Five local car dealers and three financial companies want to sponsor us.

We hope to turn The Bay Area into the nation's teen capital by inspiring open and honest talk across the country. YouthVoice is the language teens speak and will trust.

We need listeners, viewers and funding to reach teens who suffer in secret everywhere. As teens speak up, parents will, too. A new kind of communication and caring will spread. Finally, depressed, angry and scared teenagers seeking that quick out will reach for a cell phone or their keyboard instead of a rope, a gun, a pill or a gate to a bridge.

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