

Small towns face rising suicide rates

By Laura Beil, New York Times

After her family moved from suburban New Hampshire to the wind-whipped plains of southeastern Wyoming, Monica Morin embraced small-town life, forging lasting friendships and celebrating her own quirky style.

Dark-haired, with hipster glasses and a disarming sense of humor, Monica was a “why-not kind of kid,” her mother, Kim Morin, said. The kind who would wear a giraffe costume to the grocery store, just because.

Last year, during Monica’s sophomore year of high school, her mood began to darken. She turned to alcohol and marijuana, and some days withdrew from the close relationship she had always had with her parents, who, although long divorced, remained friends and partners in raising their only child. After her descent into drinking, she started cutting herself.

Morin was alarmed, aware that family history was not in her daughter’s favor. Her sister had developed bipolar disorder in her teens, eventually drinking herself to death. Her father had taken his own life when Morin was 19.

Monica’s parents sought help for their daughter’s despair, driving her two and a half hours to Casper for inpatient treatment. As the year drew to a close, Monica seemed to be improving, clinging to a fragile stability with twice-weekly counseling. On the afternoon of Feb. 4, after Monica and her mother returned to their apartment from a doctor’s appointment, Monica said she needed to finish homework in her room.

Some time later, she took a shower and asked her mother if

they could snuggle on the sofa and watch a movie before going to bed.

“I love you, Mom,” she said, as Morin stroked her hair.

Not long into the film, Monica suffered a seizure. The paramedics who responded to Morin’s frantic call searched Monica’s room and discovered an empty bottle of over-the-counter allergy pills pilfered from her mother’s medicine cabinet. She died at Ivinson Memorial Hospital that night.

“You replay everything in your head,” Morin said in her living room recently, her voice shaking. “Wondering what else you could have done.”

Stories like Monica’s unfold with disturbing frequency across small-town America. Rural adolescents commit suicide at roughly twice the rate of their urban peers, according to a study published in the May issue of the journal JAMA Pediatrics.