

Educators grapple with youths' suicidal tendencies

By Kathryn Reed

"I hope you are ready, because I'm about to tell you the story of my life. More specifically, why my life ended. And if you are listening to these tapes, you're one of the reasons why."

And so begins the provocative Netflix series "13 Reasons Why." It is based on the book with the same name by Jay Asher (2007 Penguin Group).

It has been generating a ton of press, and has brought an otherwise taboo subject – suicide – out into the open.

Tuesday night was an opportunity for parents to speak with educators and agency reps about the TV show, suicide in general, bullying and what is going on locally. While the nearly two dozen people who gathered at South Tahoe Middle School were there to dispense info rather than gather it, for two hours people had an opportunity to learn and share. (Not a single school board member was part of this circle of concerned community members.)

Even the experts in the room differed on the merits and criticism of the television show. Consensus was for parents to watch it first, then decide if their child is up for the subject matter. It was acknowledged even if parents don't want their kids to watch "13 Reasons Why," access to it is readily available.



May 30 gathering at South Tahoe Middle School. Photo/LTN • **Suicide is the second leading cause of death for ages 10-24. • Suicide is the second leading cause of death for college-age youth and ages 12-18. • More teenagers and young adults die from suicide than from cancer, heart disease, AIDS, birth defects, stroke, pneumonia, influenza, and chronic lung disease, combined. • Each day in the United States, there are an average of more than 5,240 attempts by young people grades 7-12. • Four out of five teens who attempt suicide have given clear warning signs.** Source: *Jason Foundation* • **U.S. National Suicide Prevention Lifeline –800.273.8255**

A suggestion was made to start with what is essentially episode 14, the behind the scenes look at what the directors went through, the experts they consulted, and the intent behind the show.

Watching the show with one's child will allow for discussion: it could be why consent to have sex is vital, it could be about what is being shared on social media, it could be about hiding behind an electronic transmission of meanness, it could be about their fears. The bully and the bullied need to be heard because both are hurting. Happy people aren't bullies, and those who are bullied can be traumatized to the point they see no way out but to end it all.

Suicide, rape, bullying – the series depicts them all in a raw manner. Topics are neither sensationalized nor glorified. It's life. And that's the hard part for many to comprehend; just how horrible being a teenager can be in this digital age.

In the 12 years Jim Tarwater has been superintendent of Lake Tahoe Unified School District he has seen the stress go up for kids.

"The bullying bothers me the most – the social – it's gotten out of hand," he said. "It's in the middle school."

Tarwater told *Lake Tahoe News* it's not unusual for 20 kids to attempt suicide every year. Middle school students are not immune from wanting to end their life. It's gotten so bad that the older kids in elementary schools are showing signs of depression and negative behavior more characteristic of older kids.

Kris Robison, a counselor at Douglas High School, had two students on Tuesday with suicidal issues. One was transported for care, the other not. Douglas County School District has a strict script to use to gauge the level of care a youth may need.

Safety is the No. 1 concern for educators and others when dealing with people who are contemplating suicide. They look at whether the person is likely to harm themselves, harm someone else or is in imminent danger.

But the schools can't do everything. A suspension for the bully could mean retaliation for the victim. It can be a nasty cycle.

Even though phones might not be allowed during the school day, they are weapons at other times. Pictures and words are shared – mean, hateful things. People film fights and send them to others. This is real – not something just reserved for a TV show.

Suicide, depression, mental illness – these are societal issues. Tarwater and others would like the community to be more engaged, and for students to have a passion for life. The social and emotional pieces need to be part of the curriculum. Starting next school year in California there must be a policy in place for grades 7-12 regarding suicidal issues.

It was noted that 20 percent of the population is living with a mental health condition, and 80 percent of that 20 is genetic. That is why knowing one's family tree could sound a warning alarm.

Mental health was not addressed in "13 Reasons Why," which was criticized at the Tahoe gathering.

THC, the active ingredient in marijuana, can be a trigger for a mental illness episode. A South Tahoe High School administrator said THC levels at the school are "off the charts."

"There is only so much we can do," Tarwater said. That's why parents, other family, friends and the community at large must be part of the solution.