

# West Orange High kicks off suicide prevention program

—Windermere parents remember their son by funding a noted prevention program for Orange County students.

By Kathy Aber

From the moment a child takes its first breath, parents are eager to share stories about their sons and daughters.

But Judy Buonauro was choking back tears when she talked to West Orange High School students about her son, Michael, last Friday.

Michael was generous and well loved. He had no financial difficulties and no drug problems, his mother said.

Buonauro spoke of her son in the past tense because Michael killed himself last year, one day after his 25<sup>th</sup> birthday.

The hushed student audience listened attentively as Judy related that Michael wrote a column for the University of Central Florida newspaper, was an inventor and loved history. She smiled as she said Michael was funny and opinionated to a fault.

Then, for a brief moment, it seemed as if Michael, a pioneer of online comics and successful Web-based cartoonist, was alive again when Buonauro told students they could Google him on the Web.

Judy said she and her husband, who joined her on the WOHS stage, "would have done anything to save our son. Woulda, coulda, shoulda."

Michael was depressed, and his parents realize now they didn't know anything about the signs of suicide. And

neither did his teachers or friends.

"It seems everyone was painfully ignorant," said Michael's mother.

According to the National Center for Health Statistics, the suicide rate for youth and young adults ages 15-24 has tripled since 1950 and suicide is now the third leading cause of death in this age group.

To address this serious health issue, the Buonauros have started a foundation in their son's name to provide a nationally recognized suicide prevention program for more than 60,000 students in Orange County Public Schools this year.

"It is our wish to provide a living memorial to Michael that will help other young people who may also be at risk for suicide get the help that they need, while sparing other parents of the heartache we have experienced," said Frank Buonauro, Michael's father.

Michael Buonauro grew up in the West Orange area and attended both public and private schools. He graduated from Bishop Moore High School before attending the UCF.

Through the Michael Buonauro Foundation, the Buonauros are underwriting the cost of introducing each public high school student in Orange County to the nationally recognized youth suicide prevention program known as the SOS (signs of suicide) Prevention Program. Private high schools have also been invited to participate.

Every student at WOHS viewed the SOS video presentation last Tuesday, and in less than three days, five students had been identified for possible

(See *Prevention*, 2A)



West Orange High student ambassadors (l-r) Denyse Symonette, Rochelle Williams and Joey Giufre talk with Frank and Judy Buonauro following an assembly last Friday to kick off a suicide-prevention program in memory of the Buonauros' son, Michael. Judy Buonauro holds Michael's photo and shakes Rochelle Williams' hand.

## Prevention

(Continued from front page)

suicide prevention counseling.

The SOS program teaches students to recognize the signs of depression and suicide, and research shows the program has reduced suicide attempts by 40 percent in a randomized controlled study.

Last week, West Orange students learned the acronym ACT — acknowledge, care and tell — to help them recognize a friend's or classmate's cry for help and remind them how to respond. Each WOHS student received a wristband as another reminder of the ACT steps.

The steps are: first, acknowledge the signs of suicide that others display and take those signs seriously. Next, let that person know that you care and that you want to help. Then, tell a responsible adult.

Peer Mediation ambassadors at WOHS led fellow students in class-

room discussions following the video presentation last week.

Junior Paul Keuhn told *The West Orange Times* on Friday: "It's hard to tell the signs of suicide. You can't tell if they mean it."

Keuhn said he and other Peer Mediation students regularly use their lunch periods to start conversations with students who might seem lonely or isolated.

"You see the importance of it all. If you see any signs, use the ACT technique," said Keuhn.

The WOHS students also received postcards with this advice: ACT when you see any or all of the following symptoms — loss of interest in school and regular activities; withdrawal from friends and family; feeling hopeless, worthless, angry or irritable; feeling trapped, like there's no way out; or talking about death or making threats

of suicide.

The SOS program is being offered in all Orange County Public Schools in partnership with the county's SAFE program.

The Buonauro family is also asking state legislators to share the cost of community treatment services for young people identified as having issues with depression or suicide whose parents might otherwise have difficulty finding and affording care.

If you know a student who is showing signs of suicide, contact the school guidance counselor or call Marjorie LaBarge with the OCPS SAFE program at 407-317-3327 or Barbara Kopans with the SOS Prevention Program at 800-253-7658, Ext. 107.

The Buonauros reminded the students last week that depression is usually a temporary problem that is treatable.