

Brashear students seek help to combat suicide, depression among Bhutanese refugees

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By Molly Born / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

One former Brashear High School student who was part of the area's Bhutanese refugee community committed suicide in August, and less than six months later, another tried to do the same.

Within days of that attempt, about a dozen Bhutanese students at the Beechview high school made an unprecedented appeal to school leaders, asking for help in coping with the reality that across the country, many in their community suffer from depression and higher-than-average suicide rates.

That resulted in a candid conversation in which students spoke about their own struggles with mental illness. Some confessed they, too, had thought of ending their lives. Others said they personally knew many who actually had.

"It is really impacting our kids," said Christine Tapu, Brashear's head English-as-a-second-language instructor. "It was the first time in my work in which they specifically brought up this issue."

"They really wanted to be proactive and do something about it," added Kaitlin Hens Greco, a school social worker who met with the Bhutanese students.

Talk therapy is generally stigmatized in Bhutanese culture, so Brashear leaders sought an approach that would help students deal with the emotional strain in a way that didn't resemble traditional counseling. The thinking is "I don't want to be identified as someone with a mental

illness,” observed Upendra Dahal, project director of the Bhutanese Community Association of Pittsburgh.

The school settled on Awaken Pittsburgh’s mindfulness training program, which uses meditation to develop social and emotional coping skills and helps participants work on “changing the way we interact with our own worries,” said Stephanie Romero, executive director of the new nonprofit. Ms. Romero, a former ESL instructor who comes from a family of immigrants, said she wants the Bhutanese students to take ownership of the class.

“There is a cultural divide, so I am trying to explore with them a way to make the class more sensitive to that population,” she said. “I feel like these kids need to have more empowerment and more direct say about how the class is going for them.”

Refugee advocacy groups and the Bhutanese Community Association of Pittsburgh estimate there are about 5,000 Bhutanese people living in Allegheny County, with many concentrated in the southern city neighborhoods and South Hills suburbs. The Bhutanese people fled a government purge, most to refugee camps in Nepal, where they lived for years until the United Nations began resettlement efforts.

A coordinated mindfulness training effort is likely to come in the fall, Principal Kimberly Safran said. The school board last week approved a \$5,000 donation from the Thomas Brown Alton Foundation for the program, and Brashear already hosted a few introductory sessions this semester.

But the word wasn’t getting out, and the school struggled to attract a core group of participants. Some feared the meetings amounted to talk therapy, school officials said.

“I’m not happy about that,” Ms. Tapu said of restarting the program next semester. “The level of urgency is still there, but because the population we work with is teenagers, it’s not on the forefront of their minds until something happens. But we know it’s looming in the background.

“I’ll pray a lot over the summer.”

Mr. Dahal practices meditation daily with his 11-year-old son and called it a “necessary component of coping with all kinds of physical and mental illnesses.”

“I like the concept,” he said. “This should be provided to all the students regardless of their background or age” preferably during the school day.

BCAP has hosted its own mental health "first aid" training sessions, most recently in August.

The student who committed suicide in August was enrolled at Baldwin-Whitehall School District, which also has a large population of Bhutanese people. Through a spokeswoman, district officials said they weren't aware of any issues or concerns coming from students.

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