

Walking to raise awareness



SCOTT KRISKA / GAZETTE PHOTOS

More than 250 community members walked from Medina's Public Square to Spring Grove Cemetery and back as part of Alternative Paths' 13th annual Step Up to Prevent Suicide Community Walk on Sunday.

Residents partake in Step Up to Prevent Suicide event

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The Gazette

MEDINA — Medina County residents gathered at Public Square Sunday afternoon to participate in an effort to raise awareness of suicide and resources available for those contemplating it.

Alternative Paths' 13th annual Step Up to Prevent Suicide Community Walk brought together community members of all ages to recognize the seriousness of this problem and the ways people can get help.

Gail Houk is the director of forensic services for Alternative Paths, an organization that provides behavioral health-care services for the Medina County community, as well as co-chair of the Medina County Coalition for Suicide Prevention. She said this annual event initially served as a moment of remembrance for those who have lost loved ones to suicide.

"We were just looking for a way to bring a lot of people together in the community and to be able to kind of have an initial presentation and have some kind of activity that would be something to remember, so that people that may have lost someone could remember them by walking or kind of be a tribute to peo-



Medina County Coalition for Suicide Prevention co-chair Devan Althen, left, acknowledges the work of Cloverleaf High School student Emma Bazemore who created stickers for the event as well as the logo on the T-shirts of many of the participants accompanied by the words "You are not alone."

ple," she said. "We've had families from year to year that have continued to come and support the walk who we know have lost someone along the way."

Houk said the community walk is also a way for people to gain information about resources that can help those who are contemplating suicide or help those

who have lost a loved one to suicide.

"For youth, Hope Squad is a youth resource," she said. "The LOSS Team (Local Outreach to Suicide Survivors), in the event someone does die by suicide, we have clinicians that can go out to be with the family and give them support."

See **SUICIDE**, A3

SUICIDE

From A1

We also have prevention opportunities like QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer). QPR is a class that we teach.”

Prior to the start of the walk, the participants heard from several guest speakers. Devan Althen, co-chair of the Medina County Coalition for Suicide Prevention, led the way for Robin Hawkins, who spoke about the Be SMART program, an initiative for parents and adults to take responsible actions to prevent gun deaths and injuries among children. Students from Medina High School and Buckeye High School spoke about their respective schools' youth suicide prevention program, the Hope Squad. Alexis Radford then spoke about the services of Alternative Paths' LOSS Team, providing help to those who have lost loved ones to suicide. Althen then acknowledged the work of Cloverleaf High School student Emma Bazemore, who designed the logo sported on many of the participants' T-shirts accompanied by the words “You are not alone.”

Afterward, the participants walked one mile from the square to Spring Grove Cemetery, 785 E. Washington St., before proceeding back to the square.

Houk said anywhere from 200 to 300 people participate in the walk

each year. This year, she said, at least 250 people registered to participate in the event.

Houk said she hopes those who participated in this year's walk were informed about the problem of suicide and resources that are available to those in need, as well as giving people an opportunity to remember those they lost.

“If they are someone that is a loved one of someone that died by suicide, we hope that this offers them support and that they feel supported by not just the coalition but their community,” she said. “We also hope it's educational for people, if they want to learn more about ways that they can become involved. And I think it's a show of community support to hopefully decrease stigma. We want people to reach out for help before they would ever get to the point of having thoughts or doing something to hurt themselves in any way, so we want to make sure people are aware of resources that are available.”

Houk pointed out some signs that someone may be considering suicide may include sadness, despair, withdrawal from normal activities, changes in eating and sleeping patterns and changes in energy levels. She said she encourages those who suspect a friend or loved one is considering suicide to ask them about their mental and emotional well-being.

“Sometimes people resist asking the question because they're concerned that it would trigger someone to want to hurt themselves, but that's actually not the case,” she said. “Asking someone is always important.”

Alternative Paths has three locations throughout the county — 246 Northland Drive, Suite 200A in Medina, 1 Park Center, Suite 107 in Wadsworth and 225 Elyria St. in Lodi. The organization also has a 24-hour crisis and behavioral health help line, which can be reached at (330) 725-9195. More information can also be found at alternativepaths.org.

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