



From the reporter's desk: Best practices for covering youth suicide

Elena Kadvany, Palo Alto Weekly
ekadvany@pawebly.com
@ekadvany

Evolution of the Weekly's coverage



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Stunned into silence

Teen's suicide leaves Paly community coping with unthinkable loss for second time in 13 months

by Rachel Metz

Benjamin Tachibana's freshman school photo in the Paly yearbook eerily appears opposite the page published in memory of classmate Steven Wertheimer, who took his life last October by throwing himself in front of a train.

Tachibana, 15, who appears bright-eyed and youthful in his yearbook photo, headed for the train tracks Friday night as his peers and their parents jubilantly cheered on the football team at the first-ever night game on Palo Alto High School's Hod Ray Field.

Just a few hundred yards from the Churchill Avenue crossing where Wertheimer killed himself that Monday morning, an engineer driving southbound Train No. 86 at 7:45 p.m. saw Tachibana's silhouette in the darkness and attempted to slow down, blowing the horn and flashing lights in warning.

Tachibana didn't heed the signals.

Upfront

Local news, information and analysis

Gunn teen was smart, gentle, sweet, parents recall

Junior JP Blanchard left behind a lifetime of good memories

by Jay Thorwaldson

Surrounded by a score of comforting relatives, Jean-Paul "JP" Blanchard's parents looked back on the life of their son late Wednesday afternoon with some sweet memories of his life — a shield against thinking of his

death Tuesday morning. "The kids had it right," his mother, Kathleen Blanchard, said of comments and online postings about her 17-year-old son, known universally as "JP" to friends and fellow Gunn High School students.

"He was smart, funny, had a great sense of humor — and was sweet," she said, citing a sensitive consideration for others, a love of animals and an



Jean-Paul "JP" Blanchard

ability to play musical instruments, sports and games well. He had an artistic talent and wrote well, she said. She and JP's father, Jean-Marc Blanchard, sat in their backyard in their south Palo Alto home, on a cool and breezy day, and recalled their memories of their son, occasionally pausing to choke back emotions.

About 20 relatives, from a grandmother to uncles and cousins, cir-

cled in the house, a comforting presence during an unthinkable time, the parents said.

The family moved to Palo Alto in 2003, from Burwyn, Pa., a suburb of Philadelphia, because both parents got new jobs, they recounted. Kathleen is an attorney for Genentech and Jean-Marc is a professor of international relations at San Francisco State University, residing

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Finding solace

Gunn High School students Ruth Crystal and Claire Reyes (center) hug one another while at a West Meadow Drive memorial to classmate JP Blanchard, who was killed by a commuter train Tuesday morning. (See article on page 5.)

TRANSPORTATION

High-speed-rail official pushes back

Rod Diridon urges local communities to be patient

by Jay Thorwaldson

Rod Diridon, a leading proponent of high-speed rail in California, this week urged Peninsula communities to be patient and said that key decisions for the Peninsula have yet to be made.

Diridon, a member of the Board of Directors of the California High Speed Rail Authority, acknowledged he has blamed a relative handful of residents and city officials in rich communities with seeking to block or alter an entire \$40 billion system.

He said facts are needed based on studies to counter the "half-truths and scare tactics that are guiding the project now."

One half-truth, he said, is that the decision has been made to elevate the tracks, creating what critics claim would be a "Berlin Wall" through Mountain View, Palo Alto, Menlo Park and Atherton. The decision has not been made, he said, and thus, "the real issue isn't tunneling," he told the Weekly.

*Blanchard's mother was called

Gunn High student dies by suicide

Principal to parents: 'Listen, talk and answer questions honestly'

by Elena Kadvany / Palo Alto Weekly

Editor's note: Resources for any person who is feeling depressed, troubled or suicidal are listed at the bottom of this article.

Gunn High School Principal Kathie Laurence, in an email to school families Tuesday afternoon, is urging parents to talk openly with their children and to reach out for help if needed following the death by suicide of a senior in his home on Tuesday.

Staff informed students who were still on campus for the last period of the day in person, Laurence said, and the school's crisis intervention team was available to students throughout the afternoon. The team, made up of mental health professionals, will "continue to be available for our students, teachers, and parents in the coming days," Laurence wrote.

Grief counselors, mental health therapists and psychologists will also be available to support children and teachers at the schools that the student's siblings attend, Superintendent Max McGee wrote in a message to Palo Alto Unified parents and staff Tuesday afternoon.

It's "imperative," he wrote, "for all of us to be vigilant and keep a close eye on our children and that our older students look after one another."

Laurence, who is in her first semester as the school's principal, also encouraged parents to talk "honestly" with their children and to reach out to the school, including its wellness center, with any questions or concerns.

"As a parent, I encourage you to listen, talk and answer questions honestly as your child processes this event and its impact," Laurence wrote. "If you notice any concerning changes in your student's behavior or emotional state, please contact a counselor or trusted faculty member."

- Terminology, language
- Headline
- No photographs
- Focus on district response
- Emphasis on seeking help
- Resources



Internal changes, efforts

- Created written suicide policy to guide our company's coverage of deaths by suicide. The policy evolved and became more tightly restrictive as the 2009-10 cluster developed.
- Observation of World Health Organization and AFSP guidelines for reporting on suicide
- Developed resource pages, which were later [updated and expanded](#) in collaboration with local mental health professionals and parent-advocates
- Started practice of including an editor's note at the top of stories, pointing readers to resources
- Careful comment moderation online
- Educating new staff members about responsible coverage

Beyond-the-crisis reporting



In the wake

Teens respond with messages of hope, change

story by Elena Kadavya | photos by Veronica Webster

Hayley Knikil hopes that some years down the line, when she returns to Palo Alto after graduating from high school, she'll be able to say something changed. And it won't be that Gross High School added more counselors or the school board imposed limits on the number of AP classes Palo Alto high schools can take.

"It's a mindset shift," a culture change, the Gross junior said. The evening after her classmate and friend Cameron Lee, also a junior, died by suicide on the train tracks last week, Knikil decided that more people, especially parents, needed to have that message — one of hope, of comfort, of support, of learning that it's OK to feel sad and to fail. A writer, she sat down and typed a message that was first sent out via the email list for parents of Gross juniors and then further shared — and even translated into Chinese for some parents, she said. (Gross for message on page 14).

"No one is to blame, and there are no winners and losers. I give you all to take this opportunity to be the change you want to see in the school but the atmosphere out community has created that when the crisis at Clinton as prevention," she wrote. "Everyone seems like they have many, many

but our community still seems to struggle from an overwhelming amount of pressure that is different than most others — the pressure to achieve perfection."

Knikil was one of many students last week who stepped forward in the wake of the second Palo Alto student suicide in the last month to express their hopes, their grief, their love and support for friends and family, and their aspirations for themselves and the Palo Alto community.

At time powerful, passionate, raw and heart-breaking, Palo Alto students have posted essays, videos, photos and musical tributes on social media and blogs for friends — and parents — to see. Student leaders at the Palo Alto community contributed to the outpouring with two open letters this week. One, a push to designate community counseling, detailed how each an editorial suggesting steps the schools and community can take to improve our approach and reach on page 14).

broader culture in Palo Alto that has created a somewhat detrimental definition of success.

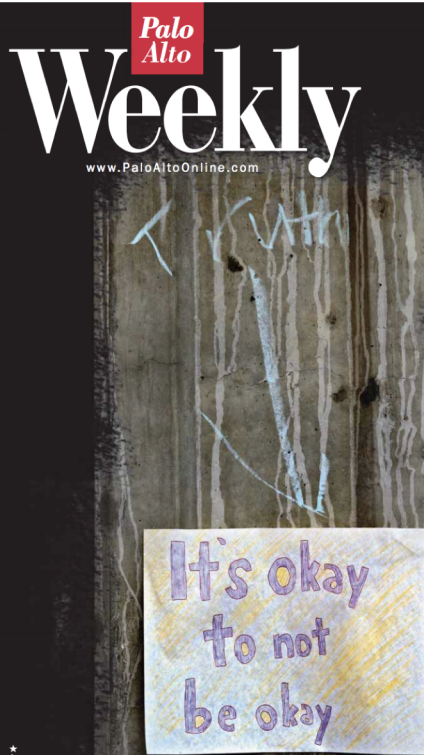
The notion that getting into a good college is the only way to succeed is really too true," junior Klavys Shin said. "But I think because they will know that they are not alone and also with the aim of helping adults and the community bring about the kind of change we will see in all Palo Alto that we want to do in order to keep up with that reputation of our community."

Shin, like Knikil, decided last week to speak out. He posted online a raw stream-of-consciousness narrative detailing his own grieving process, in the conviction that his opening up will inspire others to do so. "I am not a very sad person, seeking help to work as a negative thing to do," he told the Weekly. "People are embarrassed to think that they have issues, and it's not weird at all. We hide different pains. I think that sharing and connecting those pains is really the key. I was hoping that what I wrote could really get people out of their box and try to inspire them to share their feelings honestly."

Things happen behind closed doors and in people's heads here in Palo Alto," Knikil echoed. "We don't create an environment where people feel like they're comfortable



Gross High School sophomore Martha Cohen recorded a video last week, which she posted on YouTube, urging that students stress levels be reduced.



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Enjoy!
class guide

Community rallies with words of hope and caring
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Beyond the 5150

When a teen is in a mental health crisis, what's working — and what isn't

Story by Elena Kadavya

Sarah Gentile was shocked to find, in the midst of a crisis with her teenage son, that there are no hospital beds available in Santa Clara County for adolescents who need inpatient psychiatric care.

They were in the emergency room at El Camino Hospital in Mountain View just before the start of the school year. Earlier, her son's psychiatrist had called to tell her that her son, who has lived with depression since he was 12 years old, had a suicide plan and needed to be hospitalized for a medication change. He was placed under the care of a referral to a "5150," a 72-hour involuntary

psychiatric hold for individuals believed to be a danger either to themselves or to others.

At the E.C.H., a psychiatrist said the hours-long process of transferring her son to an available inpatient bed at another hospital.

"I said, 'What do you need? I can't stay here!'" Gentile recalled. "They said, 'No, we don't have an adolescent facility here.'"

The closest hospital beds for adolescent inpatient beds are Mills Peninsula Health Services in San Mateo, where Gentile's son stayed for 14 days. Beyond that, in the Bay Area, there is St. Mary's Medical Center in San Francisco, and then by the child and adolescent inpatient psychiatric hospital in Fremont and Alhambra Medical Center in Berkeley. There are 644 total beds requested. The annual psychiatric inpatient care, compared to 5,522 for adults.

The lack of inpatient adolescent psychiatric services is likely shocking to a community like Palo Alto that is not only sending from several teen deaths by suicide this year but is also home to acclaimed medical facilities like Stanford Hospital and Lucile Packard Children's Hospital Stanford.

As of last week, 19 students at Palo Alto and 31 at Gross had been hospitalized for psychiatric episodes this school year, with 10 students on both schools' "risk watch" lists, according to the school's principals. Inpatient psychiatric services for adolescents, a sub-section of the medical system that has been shaped by typically low demand compared to other populations, is suddenly at odds with these numbers in Palo Alto.

Tenagers who are sent away from Palo Alto for more serious inpatient treatment are not only during their hospitalization but also in the most critical time after. Some mental health professionals say the physical distance creates a disrupted sense of care that can put the onus for follow-up support on the parents.

Gentile said she was not allowed to drive her son to San Mateo while he was under the 5150 hold — this is a typical policy to protect both the patient's safety and the hospital's liability — so her family found the 515000 ambulance him.

Another current Palo Alto student who wishes to remain anonymous described her transfer from Stanford to a traumatic — "an experience that harmed more than it helped me."

"I have never experienced anything more dehumanizing than being stepped onto a stretcher and driven for 45 minutes in an ambulance up to the city, surrounded by two bored DMV workers who were much better things to be doing with their time," the student said. "I didn't. I blame them. I felt terribly guilty making up reasons to put on in the hospital. I was originally put in Palo Alto, and the feeling only worsened when it became apparent that

finding room for another 5150 made me lose more of an attachment to the medical community. You feel like you're being sent away, and your child is being sent away," she said. "If you really want to reduce the stigma, you need to have the county you're living in at least support that level of service."

Sarah Gentile, mother of teenage son, in crisis

explained Samantha Duran, media relations manager for Stanford Children's Health and Lucile Packard Children's Hospital. "If hospitalization isn't necessary, the team creates discharge and follow-up plans. If hospitalization is needed, a transfer team locates the nearest available bed in a psychiatric unit in the Bay Area. This often takes several hours; Sarah Gentile's son waited for six hours before his transfer and Manon Pierrot, a current Gross High School senior who was hospitalized twice this year after seeking emergency psychiatric care at Stanford, described how both Manon and Gentile's sons typically either limited windows of time for visiting. Mills' visiting hours are noon to 1 p.m. and 7 to 8 p.m. on weekdays and noon to 2 p.m. and 6 to 8 p.m. on weekends.

Like Gentile, Manon and her parents were surprised to find page 19