

Facing the Aftermath

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It wasn't the usual assembly. No assistant principal stood lecturing in front of the crowd of students. There was no talk of tardy policies or dress code violations. The room was dark, hushed. Junior Stephen Lanz, alone, occupied the brightly lit floor of the auditorium stage. But most unusual of all was the silence, the absence of the incessant chatter typical to high school gatherings. People were listening.

After teachers crammed in last-minute lessons before the holiday break, students were crowded into the auditorium for an assembly on drug, alcohol and suicide prevention. This action was the first in a line of programs aimed at decreasing illegal and self-harming activities among students here.

On Dec. 17, just outside the doors of the auditorium, a table was occupied by a single football jersey. It belonged to junior Simi Tometti, who had been hospitalized after a car accident involving a student driver who had been drinking just the weekend before the assembly. For some students, the jersey was a simple reminder of the classmate and friend whose condition was still in question, a reminder of the significance of the assembly and the importance of the programs to come.

"What happened to Simi made everything more real," junior Carly Wenyon said. "Even though the assembly had already been planned, it helped to put everything that had just happened into perspective."

The idea for the assembly, which came to mind only a few weeks after the loss of junior Brantlee Kuykendall, was, according to Principal Scot Finch, a fairly easy one. Finch, along with community members and the school's building leadership team, felt that it was time to take action.

"We wanted to inform the students about how important the choices they make are," Finch said. "I wanted an avenue to put students up in front of students to make [the message] more relevant. It made it more practical and approachable so students could talk and open up."

Junior Josh Zambrano, who made the video shown during all of the assemblies and spoke about his own history with drugs and alcohol during two of the assemblies, said that although speaking in front of his peers was nerve-racking, he was glad to be able to share his experience.

"I didn't tell my story for personal gain," Zambrano said. "I wanted people to learn from it. I think the assembly opened a lot of people's eyes, but also it was closure for some people."

The Journey to Dream Foundation, an organization which has developed a curriculum-based program called "Livin' It Loud," put together most of the assembly. "Livin' It Loud" focuses on educating and supporting those affected by destructive behaviors. The cast of the production included Hebron alumni, students from Marcus High School and a few current students such as Lanz and Zambrano.

"These programs can change lives," said Rebecca Walston, a college freshman who shared her story at two of the assemblies. "From my experience, I can tell you that joining a program like Journey to Dream will save you from some harmful choices you might make in the future."

The assembly was the first time the school has seriously addressed the topic of alcohol and drug awareness since the showing of "Shattered Dreams," a production featuring students that depicted the dangers of drunk driving, in 2005.

"'Shattered Dreams' was more influential to the people involved in the making of it," Assistant Principal Stan VanHoozer said. "Any program you have, you hope students will get something out of it, but most of the time there's a short shelf life."

Finch said the lapse of time between the two programs was due to a lack of necessity, and that the three student deaths in 2010 made clear the need for new programs, this time introducing more taboo topics such as suicide, cutting and sex addiction. The assembly is only the beginning, according to Finch.

"With any kind of destructive behavior, there's going to be something deeper that's wrong," Finch said. "We have to address what's going on back there before we can stop the drinking and the drugs."

On Feb. 7, parents were invited to attend an assembly that took place proceeding the Open House. The assembly, entitled "What's In Your Child's Bedroom?" featured Officer Vic Routh of the Carrollton Police Department. Routh, aided by a parent volunteer, closely examined the ins and outs of a simulated high school student's bedroom, identifying drug paraphernalia and other signs of drug use. By increasing awareness and gaining parental support, the Finch, along with the police department, hoped to make progress in his endeavors to decrease the use of drugs among teens.

"Parents have the most influence over their kids," Finch said. "As administrators, we can't be there when the students go home."

But it seems that students may be taking matters into their own hands. Guided by the slogan "Enough is enough," a group of students have been working to raise awareness of the car accident involving Tometti with bracelets bearing those words.

"We wanted to show Simi that there was hope," said Jason Blincow, a junior who helped organize the bracelet sale. "We didn't really think about the assembly when we came up with

the idea for the bracelets, but it really brought to mind the fact that these things we think only happen at other schools can happen to us, too."

The assemblies, according to students such as Lanz and Zembrano, are exactly what the school needs to spur change, but while spending 45 minutes outside of the classroom is ideal for most students, teachers and administrators have expressed concerns.

"Ultimately, this is a school," VanHoozer said. "Learning is our main objective. We can't just take students out of class all the time because some teachers, especially in AP classes, barely get all the material in as it is."

Although it may have interrupted some teachers' lesson plans, the assembly produced many positive results, according to VanHoozer, including bringing teachers and students closer together through the classroom discussions that followed the assembly.

"They were open and honest and I feel like they felt safe," calculus teacher Alex O'Brien said. "I see students in a classroom and sometimes you don't know everything that's going on in their lives."

The next step of the new programs is planned to take place in preparation for prom weekend. Finch said he is planning a guest speaker, someone who has personal experience in dealing with the consequences of destructive behavior.

"I like her story because she's not coming and blaming the world," Finch said. "She says, 'Hey, I was part of the problem. I'm responsible for the way I am now.'"

Despite his acknowledgment of the overwhelming odds against these programs, Finch said that he will always keep trying.

"I've seen enough death in my lifetime to last me a lifetime," Finch said. "I don't want to attend anymore funerals."