

Parents push for Marin awareness after son's suicide

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Kate and Glenn Ruehle look at photos of their late son Warren in their Novato home Wednesday. Warren, 17, died by suicide in February. (Jeremy Portje/ Marin Independent Journal)

If a family were a kitchen stove, the Ruehle clan of Novato had all burners going strong at the start of 2019.

Parents Kate and Glenn Ruehle, longtime Marin residents and active community members, had renewed their vows the prior year for their 25th wedding anniversary. Flourishing in their light-filled, stylish single home in the Hamilton neighborhood, they were busy in their work — he as a tech professional and she as an artist and photographer.

Their three children, Alyssa, now 21 and a student at UC Santa Cruz, and twins Kara and Warren, both 17 and seniors at Novato High School, were also busy and active — and seemingly healthy. The twins were on track to go to college and were checking off all the right boxes, it appeared. Even the family pets, Athena the cat and Rusty the dog, were thriving and playful.

“Warren’s senior project at Novato High School was training for and running the Marin County Half-Marathon,” Glenn Ruehle, 53, said. “He set up his Instagram account, and there was a due date sometime in January when you had to have 15 posts in the account. On that very date, he created that account and had 15 posts in there.”

A month later, however, on Feb. 8, Warren was dead. Without any warning — and without any obvious signals or triggers — he had taken his own life. An unimaginable shock, confusion and grief took over. The burners went out.

“He loved his pets a lot,” Kate Ruehle, 57, said, her voice breaking. “One of my last memories of him was playing with Athena. He was kneeling on the carpet, playing with her. He was giggling, because she was being funny. That’s a happy memory.”

Warren Ruehle was the fourth Marin high school senior boy to die from suicide in the last two years — and the third of those to be from Novato Unified School District. Jim Hogeboom, NUSD superintendent, said there were also other students in the district who made attempts, but who survived.

“I think we have a mental health crisis,” said Hogeboom, who was just announced Friday as the finalist for the superintendent’s post at San Rafael City Schools. The Novato district, he said, is ramping up student and staff trainings and boosting its focus on counseling support. Hogeboom said he is also working with other Marin County public health agencies to see if financing can be arranged for a wellness center at Novato High School.

Glenn and Kate Ruehle, however, don’t want to wait to raise awareness, or to tell others that there can be no stigma, shame or blame about suicide. They are pushing instead for a change in attitude, not only in Marin, but also with an entire culture that rewards young men for staying in control and being perfect — and which looks down on them when they are vulnerable and need to ask for help.

“I couldn’t save my son, but maybe I can save others,” Kate Ruehle said. “We need to have the conversation.”

On Wednesday, the Ruehles have organized a special presentation for Novato High students and staff at the school’s performing arts center. The event, which is not open to the public but which could be replicated later in the year for the community, will include a celebration of the work of the “bring change to MIND” student advocacy council at Novato High School. After that, there will be a visit from retired [California](#)

[Highway Patrol Sgt. Kevin Briggs](#), who for years patrolled the Golden Gate Bridge to serve as a lookout and last barrier against would-be suicides.

Glenn Ruehle said he hopes to send a message to all teens — male or female — that they are not alone if they are dealing with stress or emotions they can't control. The solution is not to stay alone and isolated, but to reach out and talk to someone, anyone.

"A lot of young people in this very high stressed world are experiencing mental health-related issues," he said. "There isn't any single mental health issue — there are an incredible array of them. A mental health issue is just like any medical issue — if something's broken, you work on it and you fix it. You have to realize that something's broken, and realize that that's OK. Then it can be fixed."

Adds Kate Ruehle: "Mental illness is an insidious disease because you can't see it. A lot of times you can't treat it. Sometimes the medications make things worse. The real key is teaching young people at the earliest stage possible how to deal with their thoughts."

Any practice, such as meditation, self-talk, behavioral cognitive therapy, "or any of those centering practices that can help you get through the stressful times, needs to be taught," she said.

"Our children just don't have those skills," she adds. "And a lot of adults don't have those skills."

They are also working with Michelle Cortez, assistant principal at NHS, to create a "mindfulness center" where students can stop in and get support to meditate, do yoga, rest or otherwise get relief from stress.

"I am aware and supportive of the establishment of a mindfulness center," said Amie Carter, NUSD's assistant superintendent for educational services, in an email. "This is being replicated from a concept we already have going at Marin Oaks (High School) for students.

"In our busy, faced-paced world, students need time to catch their breath and center," Carter said. "As a certified mindfulness coach myself, I have seen people from all walks of life better manage their stress through these practices. It is a tribute to Novato High and the Ruehle family that this will be in place for students this fall. We are very grateful for their efforts and advocacy for children."

The Ruehles also are making sure they find ways to pay tribute to their son in activities that he enjoyed.

Last month, for the annual Tour of Novato bike ride, which raises money for the Marin education fund called School Fuel, a family friend arranged to create a special account to set aside money raised to go toward the wellness center at Novato High

School. The group of riders raised about \$4,000, which will be donated to the wellness center in honor of Warren Ruehle and of Jackson Talbott, another Novato High School senior who died by suicide in late 2017.

And then there was that Marin County Half-Marathon on April 28.

“What we decided to do as a family was enter the marathon — myself, my nephew and Alyssa’s boyfriend ran the 13.1 miles,” Glenn Ruehle said. “And we had about 25 or 30 other people doing the 5k. And we created ‘Team Warren.’ We had T-shirts that Alyssa designed. In the end it was a just a beautiful way to honor Warren.”

Lastly, they are encouraging teen boys to shed the old macho male stereotypes that it is not OK to ask for help.

“Let’s get rid of the stigma,” Glenn Ruehle said. “Let’s get rid of the whole, ‘guy, let’s be tough thing.’ Let’s just be more compassionate, more understanding, more supportive of everybody — because everybody needs the support.

“Vulnerability has always been seen as a weakness in men,” he added. “But in reality it can become your greatest strength.”

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School and community mental health resources:

Youth and Family Counseling at the Novato Youth Center: 415-892-1643, ext. 239.

Marin County Mobile Crisis Response Team, 415-473-6392; after-hours support through Psychiatric Emergency Services at 415-473-6666.

Marin County Peer Support hotline: 855-845-7415.

Marin County Mental Health Access and Assessment Line, 888-818-1115.

Marin General Psychiatric Emergency Services: 415-473-6666.

Kaiser San Rafael Psychiatry: 415-491-3000.

Huckleberry Youth Programs Counseling: 415-621-2929.

Crisis Text Line: Text BAY to 741741.

Marin Suicide Prevention and Crisis Hotline: 415-499-1100.

California Youth Crisis Line: 800-843-5200.

NAMI Marin help line: 415-444-0480.