

SUICIDE PREVENTION AWARENESS MONTH

Cultivating mental health awareness in farming communities

By Karen Bonar
The Register

ELLSWORTH — Both a physician and a farmer, Ron Whitmer knows first-hand the physical and emotional pressures of agriculture.

The family farm has been in his family since his ancestors homesteaded it on April 18, 1898. Currently, he farms 2,000 acres of wheat, corn and milo with his son, John.

"I think like most farmers, any land that's been in the family that long ... I would like to have a legacy and make sure it stays in the family," he said. "When we were growing up, (my four kids) were around the farm, around my father and mother. My mother would take them to the fields and ride the tractors."

He has been in farming through the highs and lows. Lately, there is more low than high.

"Six to eight months ago, we got info from KU Medical Center to be aware because of how difficult things are right now," Whitmer said. The brochure encouraged physicians to be alert to signs of depression and possible suicide among farmers.

THE SALINA DIOCESE, WHICH SPANS 31 counties and nearly 27,000 square miles, is largely rural, with a strong agricultural base.

Charlie Hunt, a senior analyst for the Kansas Health Institute said the number of suicides is increasing nationally.

"(Suicide) rates are highest in more sparsely populated areas," he said.

Especially northwest Kansas.

"Farming has always been considered an exceptionally stressful profession because there are so many factors the farmer can't control — the market prices, Mother Nature, trade policies," said Kaley Conner, the coordinator of prevention, education

and outreach for High Plains Mental Health Center (HPMHC) in Hays. "These things are all out of their control and make their job more difficult."

HPMHC serves 20 counties, spanning 19,000 square miles. Within those counties, the suicide rate increased 64 percent from 2014-17. According to the Center for Disease control, the national suicide rate increased 33 percent from 1999 to 2017. Also according to the CDC, "the age-adjusted suicide rate for the most rural counties was 1.8 times the rate of the most urban counties."

"We know (farming is) a really stressful occupation to be in right now," Conner said. "We have a lot of efforts coming up targeting agriculture. We're working on some initiatives locally in northwest Kansas to further community education and outreach to the agribusiness community."

ONE SUCH EFFORT WAS ATTENDING THE Thriving in Ag Rural Life Conference in Colby, co-sponsored by the Rural Life Commission of the Salina Diocese.

Father Richard Daise, moderator of the Rural Life Commission, grew up on a farm in Kanorado, less than a mile from the Colorado border. He said the current economy reminds him of the struggles farmers had in the 1980s.

"In the '80s, farmers realized they were stressed, but they didn't realize what it was doing to their families," he said.

Yet mental health is a touchy topic for rural residents.

"Most farmers are very independent, and they take pride in that independence," Father Daise said. "There's a feeling of 'I shouldn't need any help.'"

With some farmers, there's also a perceived pressure of legacy.

"There's also stress of 'This farm has been in the family for four generations and I'm going to lose it,'" Father Daise said.

He said many are hesitant to seek men-



File photo by Karen Bonar / The Register

Farmers harvest wheat in the Salina Diocese.

tal health assistance.

"There is a stigma with it, and we need to try to remove that," Father Daise said. "If you have pneumonia, people don't fault you for getting sick like they do with mental health."

WENDELL CALLAHAN IS THE Executive Director of the Catholic Institute for Mental Health Ministry in San Diego. He is the lead author on a chapter in a book with the working title "The Clerical Response to Suicide," which with an anticipated publication date by Ave Maria Press in 2020.

"Depression is the common cold of mental health," he said. "Everyone at some point in their life will have some sort of anxiety, but we don't talk about it as a common health issue. There is often shame associated with mental health."

He said there is a clear biochemical process relating to serotonin that affects mental health and can impact suicidal thoughts.

"I think it's important we educate our clergy and ourselves on what suicide really is," he said. "It's not a moral failing. It's tragic, but there should be no more shame than a death from cancer."

"There's a very clear biochemical

process that mediates suicidal behavior, but we don't talk about it that way. (Historically, the Church has) talked about it as a grave sin."

The Catholic Institute for Mental Health Ministry (CIMHM), which is housed within the School of Leadership and Education Science (SOLES) at the University of San Diego, was founded in June of 2018.

While relatively new, the goal of the CIMHM is to develop, provide and facilitate an effective and responsive network of trained mental health ministry leaders in dioceses and parishes throughout the United States. The mental health ministry leaders and teams will serve as "prayerful companions" for fellow parishioners experiencing mental illness, provide them with referrals, walk with them through the treatment process, and provide parish-wide education on the subject of mental illness.

Callahan said the CIMHM is working with five dioceses at this time and has resources online (www.sandiego.edu/cimhm) to provide homily resources, prayer petitions, as well as suggestions for hospitality ministries for any church who is interested.

It's essential for churches to address

mental health as a public health issue, with no stigma, he said.

"A lot of folks come to church every Sunday with anxiety and depression, but they're not seeking professional help," Callahan said. "Part of being a welcoming, inclusive parish is having lay ministers with skill set to connect people with services."

At his parish in San Diego, the parish compiled a list of Catholic-friendly therapists for referral.

Some parishes and dioceses are shy about implementing ministry for mental health, Callahan said.

"Establishing the ministry will not facilitate suicide, but that's what people are afraid of. It's an irrational fear," he said. "The reality is people are dying by suicide every day without this ministry. This ministry offers some hope to intervene."

FATHER DAISE SAID A PARISH AND THE local priest can be an additional resource.

"There is an advantage of being Catholic," he said. "You can go to your priest and talk about it in the seal of Confession. You can spill your guts, hopefully get words of consolation, wisdom and forgiveness if it's needed."

"Everybody goes to confession, so they don't know why you're going. Sometimes all you need to do is talk about it."

There are cases where a penitent needs more assistance or guidance than a priest is qualified to give.

"A priest can say, 'This is beyond my realm. Let's try Catholic Charities or mental health facilities,'" Father Daise said. "Maybe we can set up a neutral ground so it doesn't look like your pickup is parked in front of (a mental health center), so the perception is 'He's in there talking to father about something, it's OK'"

Farming is a profession where it's easy to see God's hand.

"When you're farming, you're part of God's creation," Father Daise said. "You

don't have to go to a basilica to experience God being present. He's right there in your field."

One aspect of serving in rural parishes throughout the diocese is seeing the faith of farmers.

"A lot of farmers come in toward the evening (to pray) or first hour of the morning to take part in Adoration," Father Daise said. "They bring their problems to God and ask for his help and guidance. They also bring their rejoicing and celebration."

U.S. SEN. JERRY MORAN (R-KAN.) addressed the difficulties Kansas farmers face during an appropriations committee meeting in Washington, D.C. on Sept. 19.

"I think there is a huge pressure building upon farmers and ranchers today, especially involving family agriculture," he said.

He said current farmers see the legacy of two or three generations — a legacy that's been preserved and handed down. Yet with a 50 percent decrease in farm income since 2013, the ability to pass along a family farm to the next generation might not be realistic.

"The pressure to be able to hand off to their children what their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents did for them has to be a significant and tremendous burden," Moran said.

WHITMER, WHO HAS BEEN A DOCTOR FOR 40 years, said it's tough to see people lose their family farm.

"Those who have lost their farm don't know what to do and feel helpless," he said. "My perspective is that I think some people who have lost their farms are ashamed. They feel like they're worthless, and they feel depressed."

"Some find other jobs, but it's not what they want to do. But they are doing what they need to do to have income for their family."



SAINT BENEDICT
JOSEPH LABRE

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SAINT
CHRISTINA THE
ASTONISHING

Feast day: July 24

Patroness of the mentally ill.



SAINT DYPHNA

Feast day: May 15

Patroness of those who suffer with mental and nervous disorders.



VENERABLE
MATT TALBOT

Feast day: June 19

Patron of Addictions/Alcoholics.



OUR LADY OF
LOURDES

Feast day: Feb. 11

Patroness of healing.

Source: Catholic Institute of Mental Health Ministry

PRAYER FOR THOSE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

Lord, we pray for those who have a mental illness and those who love and care for them.

So often people who have a mental illness are known as their illness. People say that "she is bipolar" or "he is schizophrenic." When we talk about people who have a mental illness, we should not use that phrase. People who have cancer are not cancer; those with diabetes are not diabetes. People with a mental illness are not illness — they are beautiful creations of God.

The way we talk about people and their illnesses affects the people themselves and how we treat the illness. In the case of mental illness there is so much fear, ignorance and hurtful attitudes that the people who suffer from mental illness needlessly suffer further.

Our society does not provide the resources that are needed to adequately understand and treat mental illness. Even with the best medical care available, always taking the cocktail of medicines that are prescribed and doing their best to be healthy and manage this illness — for too many — that is not enough. Someday a cure will be found, but until then, we need to support and be compassionate to those with mental illness, every bit as much as we support those who suffer from cancer, heart disease or any other illness.

All too often our loved ones who had a mental illness died from suicide. They were sweet, wonderful people who loved life, the people around them — and had faith in you. Eternal rest grant unto them O Lord and may perpetual light shine upon them.

Amen.
Source: Catholic Institute of Mental Health Ministry

Warrior's Ranch aims to help teens, veterans work through mental health struggles



Photo by Karen Bonar / The Register
Jordyn works with Dakota, a grey Appaloosa horse, at the Warrior's Ranch in Chapman Sept. 12. Currently a high school senior, Jordyn attempted suicide during her freshman year of high school.

By Karen Bonar
The Register

CHAPMAN — Rhythmically, the song of the crickets rises and falls across the rolling hills. Soft clouds float through the sky as rays from the setting sun dance across yellow butterweed flowers.

Jordyn* slowly uses a brush along the length Dakota's neck at Warrior's Ranch. "The horses take your emotions. It's a different type of stress relief," she said. "Instead of yelling or being angry, if I work with a horse and hang out, it helps me be calm."

She tries to visit the Warrior's Ranch weekly as an opportunity to work through struggles.

"It's hands-on therapy," said Jordyn's mom, Kris*. "She seems more relaxed afterwards. The animals aren't judging. She can see the progress. She can enjoy the rewards."

WARRIOR'S RANCH was founded to provide outdoor experiences for veterans and teenagers who struggle with

suicidal thoughts or have attempted suicide.

Has 18-year-old Jordyn attempted suicide?

"Yes," she said simply. "Was it due, in part, to being bullied?"

"Yes," Jordyn said. "I took a whole bunch of pills because I was done with everyone, done with all the drama."

Kris said she knew her daughter, who once had a bubbly personality, struggled with depression. She never realized, however, how deep the hurt was.

"It caught me out of the blue," Kris said of her daughter's suicide attempt during her freshman year of high school. "I knew she was upset and I knew kids were bothering her, but she never would tattle or say specifics. I never realized how deep it had gotten to her."

Jordyn said she blocks out most of the memories surrounding the days leading up to her suicide attempt. The attempt led to more intense therapy.

"It was rough. People just were rude," she said. "It was

... like living a nightmare, but it was real. You know you had a nightmare, but you blocked it all out."

Returning to school following the attempt was a different kind of struggle.

"People who (previously) told me they didn't like me) acted so fake," she said.

"When we were in public, they were friendly, but when I would text them later, they would ignore me."

"There are a select few friends who have shown their support."

BULLYING WAS something Jordyn experienced from a young age.

Kris explained Jordyn was born with the anterior bowing of her right tibia, which means one leg was significantly shorter than the other.

"Kids would make fun of her because they didn't know how to process seeing someone different," Kris said. "She would wobble or wouldn't be as fast running, even though she was giving it a 100 percent effort."

At 3 years old, Jordyn had the first surgery to assist in

lengthening her leg. The journey involved 14 surgeries to stretch eight inches in her bone.

Due to surgeries, Jordyn missed school regularly. She spent 10 days in the hospital for surgery and would have to return to St. Louis for weekly followup appointments.

"She didn't develop a lot of friends because she was always at appointments and in pain," Kris said.

During grade school, Jordyn would get teased on the playground.

"One time, the school secretary called. She watched the boys pick on her by throwing rocks," Kris said. "Jordyn's problem was always not tattling. She didn't want to be a tattletale."

By the time she reached middle school, Kris said it was important to her that Jordyn have regular counseling sessions.

"It was hard to find counselors to take someone that age," she said.

THROUGHOUT SCHOOL, Jordyn said she struggled with feeling excluded.

"I'm used to it, but it still hurts when I have to try hard to get someone's attention, and I know they're ignoring me because they don't like me," she said. "It hurts because I'm a people person."

It's not simply being ignored, though.

"I scroll through social media and see they're having a fun time," Jordyn said. "I don't get invited to bonfires. I feel excluded."

Social media creates a host of other complications, including teens who create fake accounts to say malicious things.

"I've seen some of the messages teens send other teens," said Jodi Mason, the founder of Warrior's Ranch. "Kids who are 14 or 15 will say, 'You're worthless, everyone wants you to die.' It's something I would never imagine. Who would ever think to say stuff like that?"

Kris agreed social media has emboldened teens, but not in a positive way.

TALKING ABOUT A deeply Please see **COUNSELING / Page 15**

Ranch offers multiple outdoor therapy options

By Karen Bonar
The Register



CHAPMAN — The loss of several loved ones who died by suicide led Jodi Mason to found the Warrior's Ranch, Inc. in 2016.

The mission is simple: to save lives, strengthen relationships and brighten futures using nature as a tool.

"We are trying to tackle this from two sides: mental health and creating peer support," said Mason, who grew up attending Immaculate Conception Church in Solomon. "We want to approach from the clinical mental health side and also building a future through transferable skills."

There are many traditional counseling options available, she said. As she researched available options for veterans, she learned that in 2016, 92 percent of veterans said they would participate in some kind of alternative therapies, if they were available.

"With outdoor therapy, it's tactile," Mason said. "They will remember it and it will imprint deeper in their head and on

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Counseling, consistency are key

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personal and often private experience, such as suicide, in a public platform is something Kris describes as "scary."

"Jordyn wants to tell her story and help others," Kris said. "As a mom, I want to support Jordyn. It's scary because kids are cruel. What if some kid reads it and starts to make fun of her?"

Talking openly and candidly about her struggles and suicide attempt is something Jordyn said was important to her.

"Bullying is going to get bigger and bigger," she said. "It will get to the point where it's the natural thing to do."

The effects of harsh words and exclusive actions can be crushing, though.

"Not feeling like I'm part of things is what hurts," Jordyn added.

AS A PARENT, WALKING with a child through the aftermath of a suicide

attempt is difficult, Kris said.

"Take it one day at a time," she advised. "Kids get angry at the ones they love the most. You have to step back and remember it may be the illness or depression. Don't take it to heart."

"Still say, 'I love you.' Still try to talk to them, even if they don't want to talk to you."

Jordyn acknowledged it's a difficult situation.

"There is no handbook for parents," she said. "Honestly, every night say, 'I love you,'" she said.

PROFESSIONAL counseling and consistency is essential to developing healthy coping strategies.

"If you have to take them (to counseling) every day, do it," Kris said. "They may not like it, but one day they will look back and know you cared enough to take time out of your day to help."

"I hope that more parents reach out to each other. I'm glad to see more

awareness and stories and real happenings coming out, instead of just trying to hide (the topic of suicide)."

From a teen's perspective, Jordyn said she thinks counseling is important, but not necessarily easy.

"Counselors know everything about us, but we know nothing about them," she said. "You want someone who can relate to you on a personal level."

Which is why Kris said she feels like the Warrior's Ranch is so important.

"Working with the horses in nature is more about learning about yourself," she said. "Learning what can you do to help calm your triggers or panic attacks. If Jordyn knows how to calm herself, it is probably beneficial, especially if you can't get in immediately (to see your counselor)."

"These animals are helping Jordyn, and she is helping the animals."

**Last names were not used to protect privacy.*

Ranch is in building phase

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their heart than if you're in an office and people are talking with you."

THE IDEA FOR Warrior's Ranch began in 2014, when Mason lost a childhood friend, who was a retired army medic, to suicide. After his death, she began researching available services for veterans and drawing up a strategic plan for the outdoor therapy center. The plan includes equine therapy, horticultural therapy and adventure therapy.

"To me, nature is God's perfect neutral party," she said. "It's not judgmental. It allows you to have the quiet space to heal."

For equine therapy, Mason secured animals who are rescued from slaughter or injured in some way. Veterans or teens work with the animal to learn grooming and care.

Horticultural therapy is led by a horticultural therapist. Mason said they began this summer with the community garden in Chapman. Veterans will plant two acres of culinary herbs this fall at the ranch. Eventually, Mason said the plan is to have seven acres of the culinary herbs planted.

"Our end goal is to have a food business incubator on site," she said.

Adventure therapy is aimed at both teens and veterans, and small groups are led by an outdoor therapist.

"The idea is that there is the therapy of being out-

side," said Mason, who minored in horticultural therapy at Kansas State University in Manhattan.

"We also want to give transferable skills (veterans) can use in the workplace."

This is important, as those serving in the military transition from following direct commands to having more open-ended responsibility in a traditional job, or if they need advice or skills to start a business of their own.

"We hold workshops on budgeting, building a resume and entrepreneurship classes," Mason said.

MASON AND HER BOARD of directors have partnered with Kansas State University, KSU Research and Extension, Fort Riley, the Kansas Department of Agriculture and local VFW and American Legion groups as they have planned and developed the ranch.

While still in a building phase, there has been much physical progress. About a year ago, an anonymous Catholic donor gifted land on the river near Chapman to the ranch. Plans have been drawn up for a barn and therapy arena for horses. The arena construction will begin shortly, Mason said.

Mason said businesses such as Cabela's have donated kayaks and other outdoor equipment for the adventure therapy programs, which include hiking, camping and fishing.

BECAUSE THE infrastructure is still in the building

process, Mason said some of the veterans volunteer and assist with clearing hiking trails.

"There's a lot of peer-to-peer assistance," she said. "They talk about things. They need a space they can talk that is neutral, therapeutic and healing."

"Sometimes they will talk about the IEDs in Afghanistan. Other times, they'll suggest to check on a friend. They watch out for each other and know when someone is struggling mentally or emotionally."

MASON'S BACKGROUND is in agricultural education and leadership development. She was previously a teacher, and was previously the executive director for the Kansas FFA Foundation. She is currently working on her master's in professional counseling from Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va.

The unexpected path to founding the Warrior's Ranch has been fulfilling. Seeing teens and veterans regularly work with the horses or take time in nature to decompress and work through stress or anxiety is rewarding.

"The hardest part for me is knowing there is a big need and not being able to fill all of it," Mason said. "It can feel like you're not making a dent. I have to remember that helping one or two or three people is better than helping no one."

For more information, visit warriorsranch.org

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