

Finding Hope After Tragedy on the Tracks

When Sophia entered high school in 2008, she expected that some kids might drink too much and some would use drugs. But the Manasquan High School student did not expect that three of her classmates would commit suicide in less than a year.

According to the *New Jersey Star Ledger*, 18-year-old Timothy was the first Manasquan High School student to die by stepping in front of a train on April 26, 2008. Two months later, Andrew, 18, stepped onto the tracks and died, almost on the same spot as his friend.

In August, 20-year-old Joseph was killed by a train in Belmar, N.J., leaving another devastated family, grieving friends and a shaken community.

But the rash of deaths did not end that summer—and it wasn't contained to the tracks. On Dec. 28, 2008, Drew, a Manasquan High School graduate, hanged himself. His death marked the end of a horrible year that started when a 16-year-old died from a probable drug overdose.

The next year saw more tragedy on the North Jersey Coast Line tracks. Two 17-year-olds chose death by train: one in May 2009, one in October.

And the terrible trend continued in 2010, when a third 17-year-old jumped in front of a train on May 22. This year, a 19-year-old named Lily committed suicide when she drove onto railroad tracks in Spring Lake on April 11, according to the Monmouth County Prosecutor's office. Ten days earlier, a 17-year-old was struck and killed by a N.J. Transit train in Long Branch.

It was into this county, wracked by grief and darkness, that

Will Graham brought the gospel of Jesus Christ in May. "I want to share how people can have hope in Jesus Christ," said Graham a few days before the May 20-22 Jersey Shore Celebration. "This is one area of the country that has been hardest hit by the recession—the north end has seen flooding—so a lot of people are looking for answers. And there are the suicides. People are looking for hope."

Graham believes God uses events in the world today to draw people to Himself. "People are realizing there has to be more than what they see in the world around them," he said. "They are looking for purpose and meaning. I am going to share how they can have purpose and meaning, and have their guilt and shame taken away."

Chris Ann Waters, who co-chaired the Celebration's Prayer Committee, said she agrees with Graham wholeheartedly. "For me, Christ has been the answer. As a born again believer, I went on my knees in focused prayer to seek the Lord, asking, 'What can You do here?' and to ask for spiritual revival and that these young people can be encouraged with hope."

Waters, a nationally certified bereavement facilitator and hospice volunteer, said the whole community has been "heartsick" over the suicide epidemic. "Because of my work in bereavement, prayer for young people especially has become a spiritual mandate. They are our next generation and the baton is being passed. But unless they know the value of their life, they are not going to go forward. They are going to believe a momentary lie of Satan. Spiritual warfare is real."

Each young person who ended his or her life dealt with different issues, said Waters. Some struggled with finding their identity and with self-esteem issues, others couldn't handle the breakup of a relationship, some battled drug addiction and others plunged into despair over sexual improprieties that caused shame.

"Their burdens disabled them from realizing there is hope," Waters explained. "The suicides happened in part because of tremendous spiritual warfare going on at that point in time."

She pointed out that hopelessness can occur at any age. "Taking it from a spiritual perspective, when you recognize that without Christ you don't have the supernatural intervention of the Holy Spirit, you are at tremendous risk then of relying on your own choices."

"While those of us who walk in Christ can never minimize the fact that we are always at risk of falling, we also have to recognize that because of Christ, we are covered with a grace that unbelievers do not have. They are fully exposed to the world's ways and the wiles of the enemy if that coverage is not in place."

Another factor at play in Monmouth County, said Waters, "is the tendency to be a copycat. You see young people following suit. There is almost a sense of camaraderie that occurred."

When people aren't of sound mind, she added, they fail to understand that suicide is not the right option, and that there are other ways to cope with the challenges they are facing.

Waters has a front row seat to the crushing grief left in the wake of suicide. "We walk parents and siblings through this process and try to help them, counsel them and encourage them that they can go on. The survivors of suicide have a more complicated grief process because it is exacerbated by guilt. 'What could I have done to prevent this?' they ask."

As a professional and a Christian, Waters tries to instill the hope of Christ and give these families courage. "You don't want to see this become a pattern, because sometimes that is what happens. It becomes a familial way of finding an answer to hopelessness."

Reaching out for help is critical, Waters emphasized. "It is very important to recognize that we all face periods in our life when everything seems dark and it seems as if we will never get out of that valley of hopelessness. Whether we are inside Christ or outside of Christ right now, we all face those times.

"Nevertheless," she added, "there are answers. A tremendous number of people out there want to help you if you are hurting. We want to make a difference. We want to get your phone call. We want to get your email, even if you are embarrassed and feel ashamed, we want you to respond and reach out."

If you or someone you love needs help, call the toll-free National Suicide Hotline, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week: 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433).

One young lady who attended the Will Graham Jersey Shore Celebration decided she needed both the hope of Christ and further help. Asking not to be identified by her real name, Hannah* said she had enough darkness and despair in her life. "I grew up a block away from one of the teens who killed himself on the tracks. That is all I want to say—it still hurts so much.

"I want to give this Jesus thing a try," she added. "I have nothing else to lose and I guess something to gain. I guess I want hope."

Close to 14,000 attended Will Graham's Jersey Shore Celebration; more than 880 made decisions to turn their lives over to Jesus or recommit their lives to Him. In the latest Billy Graham television program, you can watch a recap of the three day Celebration, and see the impact of the 2010 Rock the River Tour West through the eyes of local teens.

*Name changed for confidentiality purposes

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