

Grant supports campuswide suicide prevention efforts

By Margie Fishman

When Amanda Garcia-Williams' half brother committed suicide in 2007, he left behind a trail of survivors, family and friends wracked with regret over what might have been had he only asked for help.

"Suicide is not anyone's first resort," says Garcia-Williams, a doctoral student in public health. "It's after struggling and suffering for a while."

Rather than relying on at-risk individuals to seek out the resources they need, a new University-wide suicide prevention effort aims to find them first, through trained community "gatekeepers," online screening tools and culturally relevant videos that help reduce stigma and promote a community of caring.

Funded by a three-year federal grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the Emory Cares 4 U program underscores the University's commitment to students' mental well-being.

In fall 2008, Emory enacted a mental health and counseling fee on the recommendation of the University's Mental Health Task Force, appointed by President Jim Wagner to prioritize the mental health and wellness needs deemed most critical to the community. The initiative grew from an appeal by Molly Harrington '05C, who, as an undergraduate, recognized the need for candid discussion about mental health challenges on campus.

In the last year alone, more than 30 Emory students were psychiatrically hospitalized primarily for suicide-related behaviors, a 50 percent increase compared to four years ago.

Mark McLeod, director of the Student Counseling Center, attributes the increase to expanded mental health outreach efforts, identifying and tracking the most at-risk students. At the same time, an achievement-oriented culture has stressed students to the limit.

"Some of these kids have been so taken care of and are so focused on success that they haven't found the time to develop the social skills they need," he says.

Garcia-Williams agrees, explaining that some students view suicidal behaviors as a sign of weakness or fear of being removed from school if they come forward.

“A team of diverse faculty, staff and students is really reaching out wherever we can access students,” says Nadine Kaslow, a professor in Emory’s Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences and chief psychologist at Grady Health System, who is the principal investigator for the suicide prevention grant. “Receiving this grant is a huge honor that enables us to provide screening, gatekeeping and educational services on campus.”

Named for the son of former Sen. Gordon Smith (R-Ore.) who killed himself at the age of 21, the Garrett Lee Smith Suicide Prevention Grant will fund training for faculty, staff and students to help identify at-risk behaviors, such as expressing suicidal thoughts, struggling with depression, withdrawing from friends and activities, or abusing alcohol, says Kaslow.

“We will be gatekeepers for students but also gatekeepers for each other,” adds McLeod.

Over the next year Emory will administer an anonymous online screening survey for graduate and professional students, in collaboration with the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and the Johnny Foundation. Another survey is in the works to poll 1,400 randomly selected students community-wide, as well as faculty and staff, to gauge their knowledge of suicide prevention.

The University has partnered with Behavioral Health Link to increase the coverage already provided in the evening by the Emory student-run Helpline and offer a round-the-clock service. There are also plans to unveil a suicide prevention Web site in non-English languages, including Korean and Chinese. Educational seminars will focus on positive psychology and mindfulness.

Garcia-Williams, who has volunteered to assist with the online survey and plans to complete her dissertation on suicide survivors, believes the campuswide effort will clarify the steps involved for those contemplating suicide to comfortably seek advice.

“Suicide is not just about the individual,” she says. “It’s all the people surrounding the individual who are changed completely.”