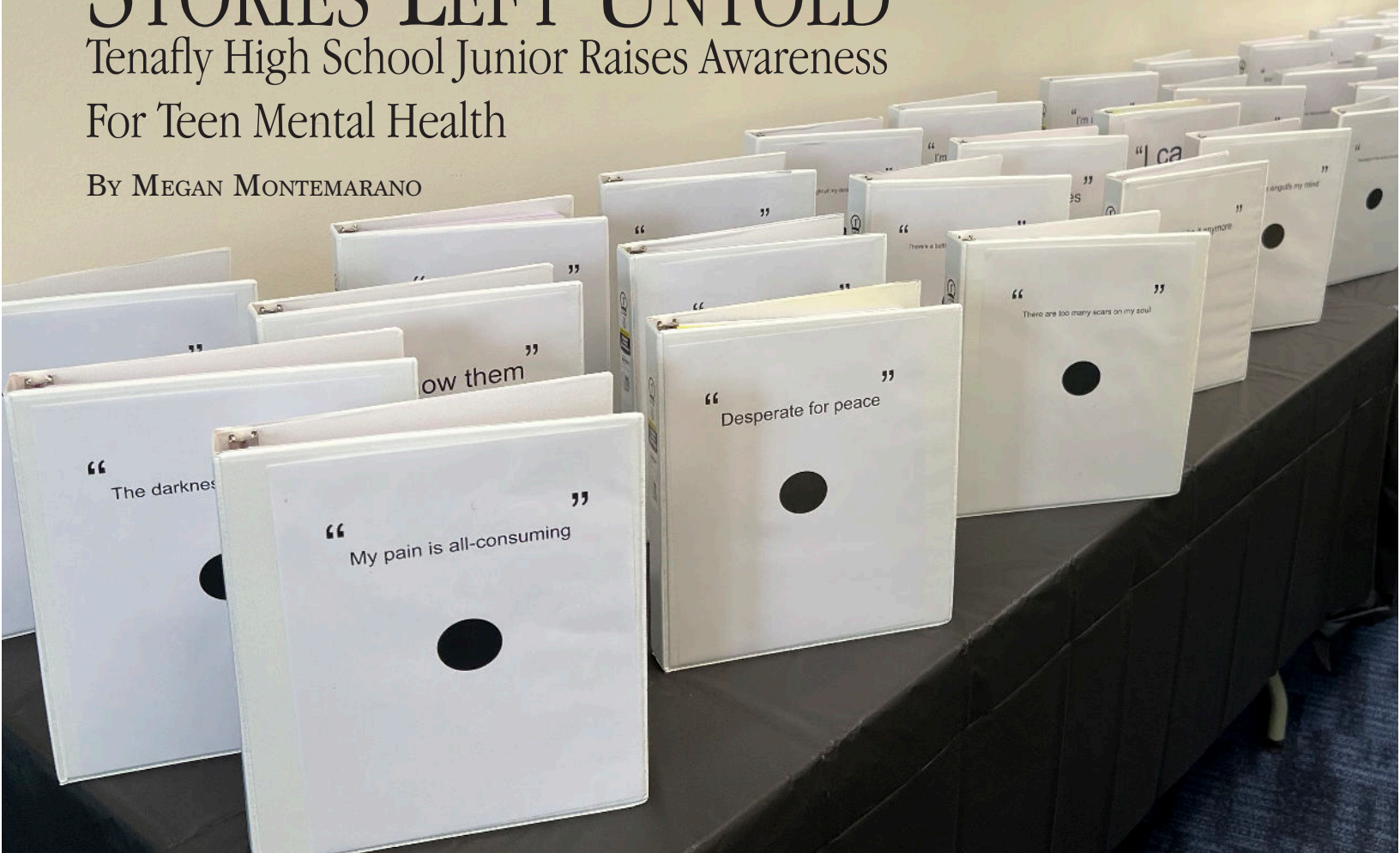


# STORIES LEFT UNTOLD

## Tenafly High School Junior Raises Awareness For Teen Mental Health

BY MEGAN MONTEMARANO



Everyone should have the chance to finish their story – no blank pages left unturned. But with the rising rates of teen suicide, far too often these stories are cut short, a precious life gone too soon.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, suicide is the second leading cause of death in the United States among people ages 15-24. Nearly 20 percent of high school students have seriously contemplated taking their own life and 9 percent have attempted suicide. These numbers continue to rise, with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention reporting the rate of teen death by suicide (ages 15-19) up approximately 35 percent over the past two decades.

While there are many contributing factors at play, Tenafly High School junior Jaylen Tang, saw the negative effects of the recent COVID-19 pandemic on himself and his peers first-hand.

“We were really struggling due to the constant fear of isolation and not being able to go outside of the house,” says Jaylen. “I believe it was then when my interest in mental health spiked, but I didn’t have the courage to take action.”

This all changed after a study abroad trip to Costa Rica. Jaylen encountered a counselor named Louis, who was dedicating his life to traveling to different parts of the world to spread awareness about mental health. Immediately, Jaylen thought of the days of the pandemic. He asked Louis what made him decide that mental health would be his life’s mission.

“Louis told me that his father took his life in front of him,” explains Jaylen. “He literally held his father in his arms and watched and listened to him taking his final breath.”

Hearing this story rekindled a fire within Jaylen, providing him with the courage to finally act.

“It was then that I made the decision to be like Louis and help do my part in creating awareness within my community,” he says. “Increased awareness can help to save lives.”

Sure enough, Jaylen soon had a teen suicide prevention exhibit and event underway. “Hope & Healing” was held at Englewood Public Library in commemoration of May’s Mental Health Awareness Month.

“Once my idea was secured and venue booked, I spent the whole year up until the very last moments before the event emailing multiple contacts and resources to ask for advice and help spreading the word,” comments Jaylen.

The exhibition consisted of 73 loose-leaf binders representing the number of young adults ages 15-24 who tragically died by suicide in New Jersey in 2022. The first 15-24 pages featured color paper, while the remaining pages were left blank to represent the young adults that did not have a chance to finish writing their story. Each binder had a quote on the front that a young individual who died by suicide might have said. There was also the symbol of a large period underneath the quote, representing the end of their unfinished story.

*Continued on page 38*



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Jaylen set the scene by speaking about the recent rise in mental health struggles, and his resulting determination to end any stigmas and encourage further discussions around this topic in the community. Englewood Mayor Michael Wildes, New Jersey Assemblywoman Shama Haider, Tenafly Mayor Mark Zinna and Bergen County Commissioner Mary Amoroso, also said a few words about the challenges regarding teen mental health in New Jersey, and how important it is to provide resources to their residents.

An event highlight was fellow Bergen County teenager Colin, from the national mental health non-profit, Minding Your Mind. He shared his own personal challenges in high school with mental health and suicide, discussing how critical the support of family and friends are in helping to reframe priorities and perspectives as a teenager. Now a regular speaker for the non-profit, Colin is focused on spreading awareness and leaving a positive impact on the community, just like Jaylen.

“Becoming a speaker for Minding Your Mind has

changed my life,” says Colin. “The people I’ve met, relationships I have created, and the opportunity to go out in the world and share my story is truly special. I know there are kids everywhere who are struggling in silence just like I once was. I want to reach those kids and let them know that they are not alone.”

Minding Your Mind also donated comfort blankets for the audience to receive and use in times of need. Colin’s discussion had a huge impact on all attendees, including Jaylen.

“His story about attempting suicide not once, but twice, really moved us all in the audience,” says Jaylen. “His message of belonging, hope and never giving up is exactly the message that I want to convey.”

It’s not easy being a teenager in today’s complicated society, and the COVID pandemic made it even harder.

“Whether it was the fear of isolation or the constant

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concern about the safety of ourselves and loved ones, this time really affected me and others in many different ways,” explains Jaylen.

When asked about other contributing factors to a teen’s mental health and wellbeing, he cited bullying and peer pressure, both online and offline. Increasing pressures to fit in, conform or engage in risky behaviors further contribute to feelings of isolation and distress. Jaylen also mentioned high expectations from parents, schools and society to achieve academic success and the fear of failure. Intense competition and excessive workload can negatively affect mental health and intensify vulnerability to suicidal thoughts.

During the event, Jaylen received many awards that he humbly says he did not expect. He received two from Bergen County Commissioner Mary Amoroso, one award from New Jersey Assemblywoman Haider and one award and written letter of gratitude and acknowledgment from NJ Senator Cory Booker.

While this event is now over, it is certainly not the end of Jaylen’s restorative journey in the Bergen

County community. He plans to continue using the binders for more mental health awareness events coming up in September, which is National Suicide Prevention Month. Other ideas include the creation of a volunteer website and a 5K run for mental health. Jaylen will eventually donate the binders to underprivileged schools or give them to a non-profit organization that will send them to Ukraine.

“My hope for the future is that more young people will be okay with admitting they are not okay,” adds Jaylen. “And for them to always know that no matter what, they are not alone.”

*For more information on Minding Your Mind, visit [mindingyourmind.org](http://mindingyourmind.org).*

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