



Veronica Nott, who lost her sister to suicide, speaks to students from across Licking County who came together Friday.

**NEWARK** — On Friday night, 17-year-old Newark High School junior Maleek Greene was on a laptop in the school cafeteria, typing a message to a friend about suicide awareness. Nearby, freshman Atlanta Thomas was doing the same thing.

Greene and Thomas told their friends they care about them, then they shared some suicide statistics: that about 811,000 Americans attempt suicide each year, and that nationwide, someone commits suicide every 16 minutes on average.

Friday was the third annual suicide prevention night at Newark High School. More than 100 students from across the county met in the school's cafeteria. They used their cellphones and laptops to call, text or message as many people as they could, telling each person he or she is valuable, sharing a suicide statistic and passing along the 211 crisis number.

In Licking County, the suicide rate is about 14.7 per 100,000 people, higher than the national average of 11.5 per 100,000 people, said Justina Wade, Mental Health America of Licking County suicide prevention coordinator.

In 2013, there were 20 suicides in Licking County, compared to 33 the year before, Wade said. "Our goal is to spread awareness on suicide and let everyone know the resources that are out there," Wade said. "Get the kids more involved in their community."

Last year, 120 students attended the event, reaching out to about 10,000 contacts. This year, 150 signed up, and Wade is hoping to reach even more people. "Hopefully, one day, we won't have any suicides," she said. "I think that's kind of a high (goal), but we can just take one day at a time and try to make a difference."

Near the start of the evening, 20-year-old Veronica Nott, of Newark, talked about losing her younger sister to suicide. "She was 16. She was my best friend. Her name was Heather," Nott said. Heather was a high-school sophomore and a track star, and "she had a smile that lit up her whole face." Nott had no idea her sister was contemplating killing herself.

"I talked to her two hours before she took her life," she said. "Two hours. She was happy. We had plans to go shopping. Two hours later, she was gone. ... Sometimes, it's the person you least expect it to be. Like Heather."

#### Suicide statistics

- Someone commits suicide every 16 minutes in the U.S.
- Each year, 811,000 people nationwide attempt suicide.
- In Licking County, the suicide rate is 14.7 per 100,000 people, higher than the national average of 11.5 per 100,000 people.
- There were 20 suicides in Licking County in 2013, compared to 33 the year before.
- For crisis help, call 211 in Licking County or 800-273-TALK.

Source: Justina Wade, Mental Health America

Nott encouraged students at the event to contact as many people as they could, because it's not always easy to tell who needs help. Everyone thinks suicide will never happen in their family or circle of friends, but no one is exempt, she said.

"You never know what this could do for somebody," she said. "It could be a matter of life and death."

Greene lost his cousin to suicide several years ago, he said. It taught him that life can go quickly, and now, he wants to help anyone else who might be contemplating a similar move. It might seem like no big deal, passing along a hotline number and asking someone if they're OK, but it could make a big difference, he said.

Sometimes, people just need to know they have someone to go to if they need a friend, Thomas said. "Lots of people feel like they have no one to talk to," she said. "If you just give them a message, let them know you're here, they'll actually feel a little bit better."

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