

The PROSECUTOR

Getting in Ahead of Tragic Endings and Changing the Tattletale Mindset



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BY GINA GODBEHERE

THE WORK OF A PROSECUTOR often starts at the conclusion of a tragedy. Right now that truth is most evident in Florida where prosecutors are looking at handling the worst school shooting in our country's history. However, for the Maricopa County Attorney's Office, getting in front of school tragedies and trying to prevent them has become a mission.

A few years ago in Arizona, I found myself looking at the aftermath of a school shooting. I had been called to the scene as the Bureau Chief in the Community Based Prosecution Division. Two girls were dead on the campus of a high school, teen victims of a murder suicide. In the hours following the tragedy, there was a familiar feeling emerging... just like in countless other school tragedies, there had been numerous warning signs, only no one said anything or did anything. Our kid's aversions to being tattletales, talking to adults about a problem, or letting the hidden on social media come to light had caused a silence and inaction that cost two young girls lives.

I left the scene of that school shooting feeling compelled to create a solution. I wanted to create a way to help teens not only identify when someone is in a cri-

sis, but empower them to know what to do with that information.

I took the idea to a leadership class I was involved in and connected with Pendergast School District Superintendent Dr. Lily Matos DeBlieux and Strategic Business expert, Jennifer Rogers with GCON Inc. We agreed that real change for this issue could be achieved for students here locally, but to have a true impact it needed to involve every sector from schools to law enforcement, to community resource partners and local leaders. Acknowledging that we may not be able to control all external factors that lead to shootings, suicides, depression, and bullying, we felt we could change the mindsets and attitudes of our youth.

With sponsorship from the Maricopa County Attorney's Office the women's planning eventually led to the Speak Up, Stand Up, Save A Life Youth Conference. The daylong conference brought in students from 6-12th grades from across Arizona and exposed them to speakers who gave a voice to the difficult issues the students face on a daily basis, both inside and outside of school. Students were then given training on how to increase their own ability to speak

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up and tell a “trusted adult” when they see behavior that could be harmful to another student.

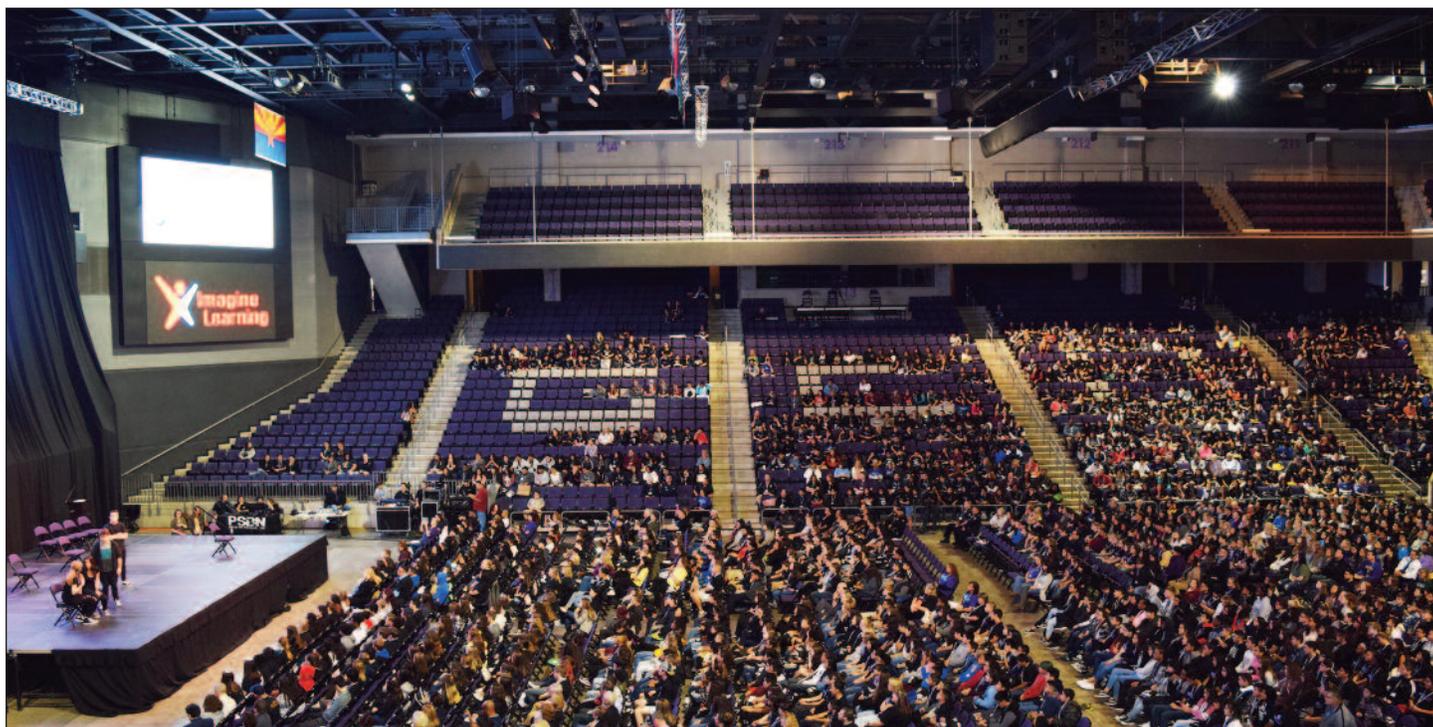
“We asked students why they did not speak up and they told us the main obstacles were that they didn’t want to upset their friends, no one told them they should, and they didn’t think it would matter,” said Dr. DeBlieux, a conference co-founder and school superintendent.



These obstacles were focused on and discussed in student lead small breakout sessions during the conference. Then students were inspired to create lasting solutions to these obstacles that they could implement back at their own schools.

However, what made the conference unique was the outreach it also offered to adults. School staff, local leaders and law enforcement were involved in their own breakout sessions. These sessions brought together the different groups to talk about warning signs and how they can communicate better with students. Conference organizers also provided follow-up resource nights at different schools focused on helping educators and parents learn about the difficult issues students face and the programs and resources available in their own cities to help them. The conference team wanted to ensure that adults knew how to be a “trusted adult” to these kids and have access to the resources that can get someone help.

“As adults, if we are lucky enough to get a student to open up to us, we have to be willing to listen, truly listen and be open-minded to what they are saying. It’s not comfortable to talk with a child about cutting as a



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way to deal with emotions, or listening to their ideas on killing themselves, but it is our job and duty as adults to get through it and hear what our kids are experiencing in today's world," said conference co-founder Jennifer Rogers. "Our event is a movement. Our hope is that if we start to show our kids we can listen, they will be more eager to speak up," Rogers added.

The Speak Up, Stand Up, Save A Life Conference just finished their second annual event in January. The inaugural conference brought together more than 1,000 attendees, while this year the conference grew to almost 4,000 attendees. The feedback from adults and students was encouraging.

Jill Hicks, a parent of two teenagers shared, "It was a power-packed day full of kids and adults sharing their stories and perspectives around bullying, mental health and suicide. I talked to students at the conference who felt empowered to be part of this positive movement to save lives at their schools by speaking up!"

It will take time and more work, but we are slowly

making a difference at schools and in time we will change the tattle tale mind set and get our students and our communities as a whole to speak up and take action before a tragedy occurs.

A mind set change in our youth today may garner more than just a current solution to school tragedies like the one in Arizona or the most recent shooting in Florida.

Prosecutors often face the issue of someone not wanting to be a witness in a criminal case, as adults there is also a compulsion to not want to get involved or be a "snitch. If our adults have reservations, is it surprising that our youth do not want to speak up when a classmate is in trouble? Imagine if in this generation we can change the mindset. What if we can convince teens that speaking up and standing is the right thing to do? Not only could we prevent more tragedies at our schools, but imagine what it could mean in five or 10 years. We could have more willing victims and witnesses to help us solve crimes and prosecute cases.

For more information on the Speak Up, Stand Up, Save a Life movement visit speakupstandupsavealife.com



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