

How One Town Is Saving Its Teens

IT TOOK AN OUTPOURING OF HEARTBREAK TO BEGIN TO HEAL FROM INDIAN VALLEY'S SUICIDE EPIDEMIC. BUT NOW SUICIDE IS A COMMUNITY DISCUSSION, OUT LOUD AND IN PUBLIC, AND THAT SEEMS TO BE HELPING.



Ethan Elzea, 15, believes talking about suicide will help him and others cope with the dark thoughts that often trouble teenagers, including his friends and classmates in Indian Valley, Calif.



YES! PHOTO BY JANE BRAXTON LITTLE

Jane Braxton Little

During the long, hard winter of 2011, the bleakest moment for Indian Valley, Calif., came with the chilling news of a sixth youth suicide. Ethan Elzea, then a reclusive 12-year-old, could name all of the dead boys: Rodney, Nate, Joaquin, Nick, Robby, Miko. But the shot that killed Nate Cunningham came closest to his heart.

Ethan, who confesses to having suicidal thoughts himself as early as the fourth grade, had followed Nate around their northern Sierra Nevada community like a little brother. They swam together and canoed in Lake Almanor. Ethan looked up to Nate, a counselor and fellow Native American. The relationship offered him respite from their home community, where racial tension and bullying are widespread.

“He was someone I could talk to,” says Ethan, now 15, slender and serious. The string of suicides—all of which occurred during a two-year period—sent him into a devastating depression. He brooded about violence, including the death of his sister’s cat, killed with a baseball bat. “I was angry at everything around me,” he says, his voice low and guarded. “I basically hit rock bottom.” For a few seconds Ethan’s eyes go dark and furious behind his maroon-rimmed glasses.

The six teen suicides shook Ethan’s rural community like an earthquake. Home to ranchers, loggers, and retirees, it is a place where almost everyone knows everyone else, often across several generations. The dead boys were sons of Indian Valley. Some were gentle, others pranksters. Some played sports, others dabbled in music. All but one were Maidu Indians, and all came from two-parent households where drugs, alcohol, and domestic violence had been longstanding problems. All had been exposed to bullying, and they knew each other well.

The community waited in stunned

silence for some response from local social service providers. Greenville High School offered one day of grief counseling after the death of the oldest boy, a non-Native who had been out of school for several years, and the Maidu education center held a day-long gathering with healers and dancers. That was it. No discussion for parents, no suicide prevention training for teachers, nothing to kick-start the painful process of healing.

A close-knit community of 3,000 residents, Indian Valley had rallied together after forest fires, floods, and the threatened closure of the area’s only high school. The suicides, however, seemed to drive people into isolation. No one talked openly about them, says Susie Wilson, a lifelong resident whose husband, brother, and several close friends had killed themselves in years past. “It was as if we were all frozen in fear.”

Ethan was lucky. Though reticent himself, he comes from a talkative family. They hold weekly meetings—no electronics, no telephones—and discuss everything from daily chores to thoughts of death.

“If you talk about things, they don’t seem so bad,” says his sister Cassy, 18. “And maybe you can stop someone from committing suicide,” adds Haylee, 14.

This was the hope that inspired their mother, Marsha Ebersole, to team up with Wilson. Compelled by a yearning to spark community discussion about what was happening, the women took what now seems like an obvious first step: They held a public meeting. The gathering, in January 2012, drew about 85 people, a high turnout for any local event in January. The county director of mental health attended along with parents, Maidu elders, educators, and the Plumas County sheriff.

“This was an outpouring of heartbreak,” says Wilson.

Within a month the parents, officials, and teenagers who attended had organized the Indian Valley Youth >>

- » Summit, a grassroots group that met monthly to coordinate responses to the apparent epidemic of suicidal depression among local young people.

Teen suicides on the rise nationally

Indian Valley, tucked into the Sierra Nevada mountain range, 250 miles northeast of San Francisco, is rich with forests, streams, and fertile soil. But the lush natural resources belie a disturbing trend: As in many other isolated rural communities, parents and social service providers here are struggling to cope with a surge in youth suicides. Among people 15 to 24 years old, suicide is the third leading cause of death nationwide. It is the fourth leading cause of death among 10- to 14-year-olds. And although there were fewer suicides overall during the 2000s, for teenagers the trend spiked. The National Conference of State Legislatures reports that since 2010, suicide among 15- to 24-year-olds has increased by about 6 percent. For 10-to-14 year olds, the numbers shot up by 100 percent.

The highest rates are among Native American teens, who kill themselves three times more frequently than kids from other demographics. Natives aged 15-to-24 have the worst numbers in the nation: 3.5 times the average. This has led tribes in Alaska and elsewhere—believing that youth feel adrift—to develop programs aimed at reconnecting teenagers to their culture. Many face the challenge of becoming adults without any link to their tribal past: the stories, survival skills, and supportive families that might provide a stronger sense of identity. Scientists believe strengthening these ties can reduce substance abuse, depression, and other risk factors, says Stephanie Woodard, who writes about Native youth suicide.

In a series of stories in *Indian Country Today*, Woodard describes suicide-prevention camps that take Alaskan youth into the wilderness, where they come face-to-face with the rudiments of basic survival—and their demons. Other tribes use skits, traditional games, and storytelling along

with outdoor activities such as hunting and fishing. These programs are not a panacea, says Lisa Wexler, a University of Massachusetts professor working with Native Alaskan communities. But they often start conversations that can be life-changing for depressed kids who see no other way out.

Farrell Cunningham, a Maidu traditionalist who grew up in Indian Valley, is dedicated to revitalizing the native language and culture, believing that this will increase confidence and self-worth among Maidu. (Three of the young men who recently took their own lives were disconnected from their tribal heritage.) But an awareness of the world beyond their own small town may be just as important. Teenagers need to realize that Indian Valley isn't "the beginning or the end of anything," Cunningham says. "It's just the place where you live, and you can go off and do and be anything that you want."

There are obvious reasons for the hopelessness Cunningham senses in Indian Valley youth. Unemployment hovers at 17 percent. When they envision the future, many young people here—both Native and non-Native—list "suicide" alongside traditional life choices, says Wilson. "There's college, travel, jobs, marriage, suicide... It's been normalized—just part of the conversation." Add to that the racial stigma and cultural ambiguity many feel, and it's a recipe for disaster, say scientists with the National Institutes of Health.

The Indian Valley Youth Summit, the first and only organization in Plumas County devoted entirely to suicide awareness and prevention, does not concentrate exclusively on Native Americans; its focus is all youth suicide. But studies suggest that the more it can respond to the unique needs of the Indian Valley community, the better its chances of success.

Surviving backlash

As the Youth Summit continued to meet in the spring of its first year, participation began to wane. Promises of help from the county mental health

department and Native American organizations never materialized. Several students were teased for their involvement, and some agency heads criticized the group's founders, Ebersole and Wilson, for not being health professionals. They were dismissed as "bored white housewives," says Ebersole, a Wailaki Indian and mother of six. She and Wilson, a longtime family-services advocate, puzzled over the backlash. Was it institutional defensiveness for a failure to respond to the very households now grieving over lost sons? Or perhaps a preference for focusing on more affluent, non-Native communities?

In any event, the institutional failures that existed before the Summit remained, says Harry Rogers, an Indian Valley rancher who attended the first meeting. "The agencies were blowing us off. I don't like to point fingers, but that was the feeling."

Many grassroots groups face resistance, and many fold under the pressure. But the Youth Summit leaders persisted. "Somebody has to do this," says Wilson. "We will not allow our youth to be dismissed."

She and Ebersole organized the county's first suicide prevention training for teens. To encourage camaraderie, they launched community movie nights, created a Wii video game tournament, and hosted a day-long session on nonviolent communication. Among the needs teenagers voiced repeatedly: better communication with adults. In an early survey, 89 of the 91 young people who responded said they wanted a mentor. Summit leaders set about matching them with positive role models.

Rogers, the Indian Valley rancher, suggested creating no-suicide contracts. He designed a wallet-sized card listing the name and phone number of a "survival buddy." Teenagers who signed the contracts pledged not to harm themselves and promised to call their buddies if suicidal thoughts arose. Rogers, a shy man, says the effort it took to stand up in public and introduce the contract will be worth

every painful second if it makes a youth think twice. “I just don’t want to see any more kids die,” he says.

Despite the considerable hurdles, these small, homegrown measures appear to be working. Other grassroots groups have sprung up, and last summer there were twice as many youth activities in Indian Valley as the year before—including teen movie nights and Audubon-led birding trips. This summer saw the addition of a kids community garden and hikes in nearby Lassen Volcanic National Park.

A major breakthrough came during the 2012–13 academic year. The Plumas Unified School District and its previous superintendent, both defendants in a federal lawsuit alleging racial discrimination, had been particularly dismissive of the Youth Summit. But when Micheline Miglis took the helm in September 2012, she immediately welcomed the Summit as a community-based organization. Miglis allowed Greenville High to hold an assembly about bullying and suicide, something Ebersole and Wilson had long requested. She helped organize similar assemblies at other county high schools, and she directed teachers to develop suicide-prevention curricula. Kimball Pier, appointed in February to head the county mental health department, has provided funds to expand the mentor program and open a community center for teens.

“The doors have flown open in the last few months,” says Wilson. “We have grown from a mentality that wouldn’t let us talk about suicide to a program about suicide that’s countywide.”

Encouraged, several high school students have tackled suicide in academic assignments. Terra Adcock, a senior at neighboring Chester High, focused on bullying by designing a form that allows students to report harassment while remaining anonymous, and last April she hosted an all-school assembly about the signs of depression, identifying specific agencies to call when in need. “The



YES! PHOTO BY JANE BRAXTON LITTLE

Many Indian Valley teenagers have signed contracts promising to contact a “survival buddy” if they have suicidal thoughts. Among them, from left, are Ethan, Cassy, and Haylee Elzea at the family ranch.

pressures of life at our age are difficult, but they’re not so difficult that thousands of teenagers a year should be killing themselves,” Adcock says.

For science class, Ryllie Cantrell, a Greenville sophomore, studied the effect of weather on suicide rates. Her sister Aynslee, who knew several of the boys who killed themselves, is completing a school-wide presentation on the psychological impact of bullying. “We can’t sweep it under the rug anymore,” says Ryllie, “and people around here would, if we didn’t keep talking about it.”

Despite these hopeful signs, the Indian Valley Youth Summit remains a work in progress. Youth participation is erratic. The mentor program, stalled by fingerprinting requirements and other bureaucratic snags, has established only eight partnerships. Yet the Summit can assuredly claim the most important measure of success: Since its formation there has not been a single teen suicide in Indian Valley.

“The little youth group that critics so belittled is saving lives,” says Wilson. And whether or not it lasts, the Summit has, undeniably, started a conversation. “Suicide,” says Ebersole, “is now a community discussion—out loud and in public.”

Ethan Elzea, the reticent teenager, still doesn’t like thinking about Nate’s suicide or any of the others. “I miss them,” he says softly. But the Youth Summit has given him words and permission to voice his own dark thoughts—“I guess you could call it a lifeline.”

Recently Ethan extended that lifeline to an eighth-grade girl who announced during the Rotary Leadership Camp they were both attending that she was thinking about killing herself. Too shy to look a stranger in the eye a year ago, Ethan spoke up, addressing a group of the 85 teens from California and Nevada. “I said everybody needs to know there is always somebody there for them. I told them about the Indian Valley Youth Summit and how we talk about suicide.”

The girl did not kill herself. In fact, without naming Ethan, she credited the camp for helping her. But Ethan knows he played an important role. After he tells this story, he looks up with a bashful smile. “I’m glad I did that,” he says. “I’m still working on getting up to the person I want to be. But we all are.”

Jane Braxton Little is based in California’s northern Sierra Nevada. Her work has appeared in *Scientific American*, *Nature Conservancy*, and *Audubon*.