

Speaker enlightens about suicide's social stigma

Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas, a psychologist, discussed the topic in the EMU Ballroom

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Students from the Greek system and members of the University community packed into the EMU Ballroom Tuesday night for a discussion about an issue many people are afraid to talk about - suicide.

The crowd of more than 600 hushed as Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas recounted the night of Dec. 7, 2004, when she heard that her brother Carson had committed suicide: "I literally felt like I was drowning. When we all resurfaced the world and the landscape looked totally different."

Spencer-Thomas, a psychologist and leadership director at Colorado's Regis University, drew from the 2004 tsunami in South East Asia as the central metaphor for her brother's suicide.

"Just like the tsunami, we had an early warning system, but it failed," she said, citing the stigma of mental illness as a key reason her brother wasn't able to get help.

Spencer-Thomas' talk, titled "Tsunami: The Impact of Suicide," was sponsored by campus Greek Life and the Holden Leadership Center. It aimed to break down the stereotypes and stigma attached to suicide.

"My brother didn't fit the stereotype of mental illness," she said.

Though her family was unable to prevent Carson's suicide, Spencer-Thomas stressed that she didn't feel shame about the event. She instead emphasized: "If it could happen to our family, with the love and resources we had, it could happen to anyone."

To address common views about suicide and mental illness, the psychologist led an activity on stage with seven members of the audience. The students were asked to respond to several statements, such as "only experts can prevent suicide." The students on stage expressed diverse opinions, none of which, said Spencer-Thomas, were wrong.

While Spencer-Thomas agreed with some of the audience members that everyone can play a part in preventing suicide, she strongly recommended that students turn to experts for training and counseling when they need to help a friend.

Spencer-Thomas outlined one method of preventing suicide - called Question, Persuade, Refer, or QPR. She described QPR as an emergency response method similar to CPR. She asserted that, like CPR, the method requires training before it can be adequately used in a time of crisis.

While encouraging students to seek training, Spencer-Thomas also listed several other ways students can get involved in suicide prevention. "Bring in a wider circle," she said, encouraging the audience to organize community awareness events such as movie nights and art contests.

One student, who asked to remain anonymous because of the sensitivity of the issue, was deeply moved by the speaker.

"As someone who's been through therapy," she told the Emerald, "I think it's important that the community is educated about this often taboo issue."

The student pointed to a fellow sorority sister: "She was my best friend in high school. She saw the warning signs that the speaker pointed out, and she helped get me into therapy. If it weren't for her, I might not be here today."

As hundreds of students filed out of the ballroom, event organizers Troy Sterner and Kelley McNutt both expressed satisfaction with the turnout.

"This far surpassed what I was hoping for," said McNutt, a sophomore and member of the Kappa Delta sorority. She pointed out that, since at least one sorority and one fraternity were not in attendance, a significant portion of the audience likely came from the larger community. She was excited that the event broke the trend of "Greek exclusiveness."

"We wanted to open up and show more support for different social issues," McNutt said.

At the close of Spencer-Thomas' speech, the lights came down in the ballroom. Spencer-Thomas instructed the audience members to find the light-up ball-point pens that had been placed on their chairs at the beginning of the evening.

"Hold up your light," Spencer-Thomas said, "if you have personally struggled with any mental health issues, such as depression, bipolar disorder, or attempted suicide."

Around the room, a large number of pens lit up.

"Hold up your light," she continued, "if you are willing to take part in preventing suicide and raising awareness about mental health in your community."

A distinct rustling could be heard, and the EMU ballroom was aglow with more than 600 lights.

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