

## Display at Rider University urges passers-by to contemplate the causes of suicide

By Cristina Rojas | Times of Trenton

**LAWRENCE** — Two hundred thirty-four pairs of shoes lined a sidewalk at Rider University yesterday — sneakers sat side-by-side with boots, and sandals next to high heels and ballet flats. Each pair represented one of the 234 New Jersey youths from age 10 to 24 who committed suicide between 2009 and 2011. The youngest was just 10 years old, and a disproportionate share, 190, were males.

Attached to each pair were tags to illustrate the types of thoughts and feelings that weigh on the minds of young people who take their own lives:

“There is so much pressure in being perfect.”

“People think I am weird and avoid me.”

“Teachers think I am making up my illness.”

“Cutting releases emotional pain.”

The display, called “In Their Shoes,” challenged passers-by to take a vicarious walk in their shoes and find out what may have led them to end their lives.

For Rider junior Allie Koury, 21, suicide is an issue that has become all too familiar, as she has lost five people to suicide — three friends, one of her cousins, and a friend’s parent.

“It’s so nice to spread awareness to get other people to realize it’s a problem in society,” she said. “Even if they just read five tags ... it’s a great way to start a conversation.”

The one-day exhibit was brought to campus by Attitudes in Reverse, a nonprofit organization started by Plainsboro couple Kurt and Tricia Baker after their son Kenny committed suicide in 2009.

He was diagnosed with depression at 15, and for three years suffered from a severe anxiety disorder.

“For those three years, he struggled every day to stay alive,” Tricia Baker said. “We struggled to find him proper help. We ran out of time. ... We want to educate people so no one else has to go through what Kenny went through.”

The couple regularly visit schools and health fairs to do their part in erasing the stigma and raising awareness about mental health issues, often using therapy dogs as a way to break the ice. “We find it makes a tough topic a little bit easier to take,” Tricia Baker said.

One in four people struggle with mental health issues, she said.

“That 75 percent, they have no idea how hard it is,” she said.

“We want people to be a little more understanding of what it might be like to struggle with an issue in silence, increase empathy and kindness toward each other and instead of labeling people, to reach out a helping hand.”

Kurt Baker said he hoped that the display would encourage students to pay closer attention to their family, friends and peers.

“When people are acting in a way that doesn’t make sense, I think we need to take

a step back and think about why that person is acting that way,” he said. “There’s always signs. ... We want students to realize that a cry for help could be very subtle and to look out for it.”

Caleb Daniels, 18, a Rider sophomore who recovered from depression, said he hopes the display will increase understanding and support among young people.

“I managed to bring myself out of it, but if I had support, it probably would’ve been easier,” he said. “Sometimes, that’s the nature of the beast. You feel a certain way and you don’t want to burden anybody else with it. Sometimes other people need to make the first step.”

Between 70 and 90 percent of mental health illnesses are treatable, Tricia Baker said.

“Kenny was in that 10 to 30 percent ... but that’s what we want to address with kids,” she said. “We want to give them permission to ask for help, let them know that it’s OK to have a biological-based illness. ... It’s OK to see a doctor. It’s OK to seek treatment.”

If nothing else, the Bakers want to start a conversation that gets people to reach people who appear to be in trouble, and to encourage people who are suffering quietly to ask for the help they need.

“When 25 percent of the population is dealing with something and we’re not having a conversation about it, that’s a problem,” Kurt Baker said. “We really want to change that.”

**For information:** [www.AttitudesInReverse.org](http://www.AttitudesInReverse.org).

