Real Talk

Ali's Hope is helping our community have critical conversations about mental health, and a new podcast at Lake Mary High is spreading the word

by Jeannine Gage

During a recent recording of the Rams Get Real *podcast: Julia Shade, Chayene Antonio, Jojo Collins, Jiannie Palma, Cassidy Hope, and Abigail Davis*

Ellen and Joe Gallagher spent four years trying to get their daughter Alyson the help she needed. Diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder at age 18, the young woman eventually lost her battle with mental illness and died by suicide in 2007.

"We were very appreciative of the help we received," Joe says, "but we found there was not a lot of targeted mental-health treatment for young people and adolescents. Whether you were 12 years old, 16 years old, or 46 years old, you were treated the same."

To try to help other area kids struggling with mental-health issues, Joe and Ellen created Ali's Hope, a foundation that works with healthcare and community service organizations to find and develop specific treatment programs for children, teens, and young adults. They partnered with the Seminole County Sheriff's Office to create the county's first Mobile Crisis Unit meant to deal specifically with calls for help involving mental-health issues. Ali's Hope also offers grants to mental-health programs helping adolescents "live in recovery, accept their diagnoses, and have hope for their future."

And Ali's Hope is active in local public schools, where Joe and Ellen felt many students were dealing with mental-health issues but could not find enough support.

"There would be only a couple of counselors dealing with thousands of kids," Joe says. "They were barely able to scratch the surface of dealing with these issues."

RAMS GET REAL

Ellen and Joe eventually realized that perhaps the best *counselors* were fellow students; that a message coming from their peers would have more weight.

"We want to make it normal for them to talk about mental wellness," Joe says.

That's how the *Rams Get Real* podcast was born. It's a podcast by students, for students, at Lake Mary High School. The first episode debuted earlier this year and focused on bullying. For each episode, hosts discuss a mental healthcare topic and then highlight various resources, including Ali's Hope. They have produced six so far.

Katy Garcia, 18, is a member of the podcast team and a volunteer for Ali's Hope. She has never been diagnosed with a mental illness, she says, but has dealt with life's difficulties and stress like many of her friends.

"There's just so much to navigate," says Katy, "with the pandemic and social-media overexposure and the pressure to succeed – it's a lot."

Members of the Lake Mary High School Student Mental Health Task Force joined community leaders for the annual Ali's Hope fundraiser at Heathrow Country Club in April: Bob Dallari, chairman of the Seminole County Commission; Dr. Tina Calderone, School Board member; Abigail Davis; Task Force member; Julia Shade, Task Force member; Joe Gallagher, Ali's Hope Founder; Katy Garcia, Task Force member; Michelle Sardokee, Task Force Member; Fayza Jafer, Task force member; and Dennis Lemma, Seminole County Sheriff.

She agrees that a message about mental wellness coming from peers is more powerful.

"Kids going through this may think they're *less than*, that they are the only ones, but they definitely aren't," Katy says. "So the more people speak up about it, the better."

The podcast has been very well received so far, both by students who want to help spread the word and by those who have found comfort from it.

"We have heard so many personal stories and gotten so much love and thanks from folks," Katy says.

Dr. Mickey Reynolds, Lake Mary High School's principal, says the podcast is one of two main initiatives the school started last year to help students who may be struggling.

"The podcast has been great," Mickey says. "The students creating it have dealt with some of these issues they are discussing, so it's a strong message."

Lake Mary High is also home to the Ram Student Lounge. Staffed by a certified social worker, it offers students a safe space to come and deal with whatever challenges they may have during the school day.

"Some of them want to talk, and they will get resources and referrals to help them," says Mickey, "and some of them just need a place to hang out for five minutes and process."

More than 950 students visited the lounge in the eight months since it opened during the last school year.

Joe says other area high schools are interested in starting their own podcasts and are working with Ali's Hope to make that happen.

Katy, who will be heading to Florida Atlantic University in the fall, says she plans on continuing the mental-health discussion there.

"I want to keep telling kids it's okay to ask for help," she says. "To provide a safe space for them to talk about it."