Special Report

A life interrupted

Their son killed himself during the pandemic. Are more N.J. teens at risk?

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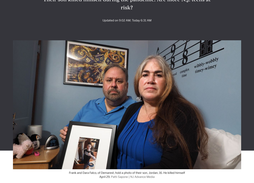

Frank and Dara Tara of Haddonfield, with a photo of their son, Jordan. (R. Michael Stewart/Special for The Courier-Post, Pulitzer Center)

By Adam Clark | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

Sandal Douglas and Samantha Lee contributed. If you are in crisis, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 or text TALK to 741741.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Suicide thoughts and behaviors can be reduced. If you are in crisis, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 or text TALK to 741741.

Jordan Tara's was still awake in the middle of the night, feeling hopeless and alone.

"It feels like I'm getting worse," he wrote in his journal around 1:30 a.m. on April 6. "I am sad more often, and sometimes sudden."

Jordan, a take-charge and unapologetic sophomore, was most recognizable at Northern Valley Regional High School at Demarest for his oversized brown hat — famously crushed straight up — and his collection of pun T-shirts, including one featuring a chemistry basket selling another. "I think you're GRABBALYTICS."

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But by that restless spring night, those dreams in Jordan's world, he was clinically depressed. Even with medication and therapy, it was a challenge to manage. Then **the coronavirus pandemic** swept across New Jersey, upending his routine, forcing him into a new life of Zoom his contentious particular activities. His hope was fading.

He spent the majority of his time sleeping. When he was asleep, Jordan explained in his journals, he didn't think about hurting himself.

"Am I even capable of crying," he wrote in Sept. 6, the last journal that April night. "Or am I too damaged?"

Twenty-three days later, Jordan's mother, Dara, walked into her husband's, Frank's, bedroom in their Haddonfield home. Dara Tara's stepdaughter, Laura, upstairs and found her parents inside, praying his son was asleep.

The bed was empty.

"I hope he's not dead," Frank thought.

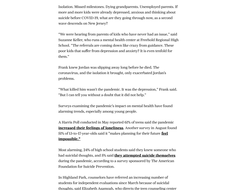
About three hours later, a caller of police cars arrived at the red house in Demarest where Jordan once spent summer days riding his scooter and chasing his brother with the hose. Dara, clinging to hope, watched from the front door as officers emerged from their cars.

"When I saw that Jordan isn't coming out of the car, I knew then," Dara said. Jordan's sister thinking: "I just knew that he had somehow, when he wasn't here anymore."

Their baby boy had killed himself, just nine days before his 17th birthday.

New Jersey, like the rest of America, already had a well-documented **teen mental health crisis** before COVID-19. The state reported the suicide among those 10 to 24 in 2018, the most recent year Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data is available. Nationally, suicides among people 10 to 24 **increased 56%** between 2007 and 2017.

Yet the timing of Jordan's suicide amid the pandemic appears to be an outlier — at least for now. After a rocky start to the year, the number of teen suicides in New jersey seemed to be drastically happening in March, said Maureen Brogan, a counselor who coordinates the Trumbull Line Coalition for Youth at Rutgers University.



Jordan Tara planned to attend Rutgers University and hoped to join the marching band. (Courtesy of the Tara family)

However, school counselors and mental health experts agree the pandemic has created a perfect storm for teens and adolescents that might one fully manifest in the months or even years ahead.

Isolation. Missed milestones. Giving graduations. Unemployed parents. If mom and mom kids were already depressed, anxious and thinking about hurting themselves, the stress of the pandemic was enough to push them over the edge.

"We were hearing from parents of kids who have never had an issue," said Suzanne Keller, who runs a mental health center at Freehold Regional High School. "Their kids are exhibiting signs of depression, and they don't know if it's just their kids from depression and anxiety? It is even critical for them."

Frank Iorio Jordan was slipping away long before he died. The pandemic, and the isolation it brought, only exacerbated Jordan's problems.

"What killed him wasn't the pandemic. It was the depression," Frank said. "But I can tell you without a doubt that it did not help."

Surveys examining the pandemic's impact on mental health have found alarming trends, especially among young people.

A Harris Poll conducted in May reported 25% of teens and young people **increased their feelings of loneliness**. Another survey in August found 30% of 13 to 17-year-olds said it "makes planning for their future **feel impossible.**"

Most alarming, 10% of high school students said they knew someone who had suicidal thoughts, and 8% said **they attempted suicide themselves** during the pandemic, according to a survey sponsored by The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

In Highland Park, counselors have referred an increasing number of students for inpatient evaluations since March because of suicidal thoughts, said Elizabeth Aumsuth, who directs the two counseling centers for the district's high school and middle school.

"For some of the kids that we referred, they were not a typical kid that had expressed an ideation before," Aumsuth said. "So it was a little surprising to see them in that state."

Northern Valley, the most other districts, was already seeing an increase in students with depression and anxiety before the pandemic. But Jordan was the first student to kill himself in more than 25 years, said Matthew Spaso, the district's director of guidance.

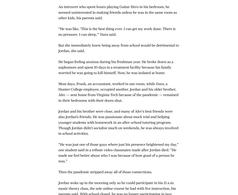
"This was a big shock," he said. "It hurts to think about it still."

Other Northern Valley students have needed evaluations for suicidal thoughts since the pandemic started, Spaso said. Dozens of other district students who have attempted suicide since March, he said.

Teens may be at greater risk during the pandemic because they lack the social and brain development of adults, said Ann Marquis, a professor in the department of psychiatry rehabilitation and counseling professions at Rutgers University.

One public health crisis could be triggering another.

"We need to remember that this is still a really difficult time, even though we have been dealing with this for months now," Marquis said. "It is still scary."



Jordan Tara was known for making you T-shirts. His puns were his grandmom contributed to his suicide by worsening his depression. (Pulitzer Center, NJ Advance Media)

Lost connections

Jordan actually joined the tea-bath for the pandemic.

An introvert who spent hours playing Guitar Hero in his bedroom, he seemed uninterested in making friends unless he was in the same room as other kids, his parents said.

"He was like, 'This is the best thing ever. I can get my work done. There is no pressure. I can sleep,'" Dara said.

But she immediately knew being away from school would be detrimental to Jordan, she said.

He began feeling anxious during his freshman year. He broke down as a sophomore and spent 10 days in a treatment facility because his family worried he was going to kill himself. Then he was isolated at home.

Most days, Frank, an accountant, worked in one room, while Dara, a Home College employee, occupied another. Jordan and his sister Jordan, Alex — sent home from Drapkin Tech because of the pandemic — remained in their bedrooms with their doors shut.

Jordan and his brother were close, and many of Alex's best friends were Jordan's friends, too. Jordan was known for making crazy and helping younger students with homework or advice when tutoring programs. Though Jordan didn't socialize much on weekends, he was always involved in school activities.

"He was just one of those guys where just his presence brightened my day," one student said in a tribute video classmates made after Jordan's death. We made me feel better about who I was because of how good of a person he was."

Then the pandemic stripped away all of those connections.

Jordan woke up in the morning only so he could participate in his E.L.a. music theory class, the sole online course he had with his classmates. his parents said. With school closed, he was no longer participating in jazz band, Jordan's favorite class, or running the sound board for productions at the high school auditorium.

Making matters worse, the state Motor Vehicle Commission closed. Jordan's scheduled driver's test in May was suddenly postponed indefinitely.

He was looking forward to that, too, and how much that might change who he is and what he does," Dara said.

School counselors across the state worried about the thousands of students like Jordan, already struggling and now marooned in isolation, a situation known to contribute to and worsen depression.

Schools switched to virtual counseling, but keeping tabs on kids was complicated. Some teens dropped off the map. Others did not show up for afternoon, making it hard for counselors to squeeze in appointments during the work day.

"Let's face with our life," Aumsuth said. "I kept calling the home, and a couple weeks later, I got an email back. "I just don't feel like talking right now."

Virtual counseling, while helpful under the right conditions, was challenging for many students. Without being able to meet in person with family members within earshot, local counselors had difficulty distinguishing how well teens were doing without being able to see them in person, Brogan said.

"When they are physically in the building, you know your eyes and ears on them, you can pick up on things," Brogan said. "When we go remote, we are relying a little bit more on the verbal cues... It is really hard on remote to see complete withdrawal."

Jordan continued talking virtually with his private therapist, and Frank and Dara would check in to see how he was feeling.

Was he happy?

Never more than a 3 out of 10.

Did he think about killing himself?

Yes, but he always said he didn't have a plan.

Despite his depression, Jordan was still doing well in school. He toured Rutgers University in February and planned to apply. He hoped to join the Scarlet Knights marching band and major in mathematics.

But Frank worried about how much Jordan was sleeping during the pandemic and the amount of time he spent alone in his dark bedroom. He knew how unhappy Jordan was when he was awake. He didn't know what else he could do to help.

"We were in a tough position," he said.

The night before Jordan died was uneventful. The family had dinner together, watched movies and played Jackbox. Jordan was in his bedroom and Frank stayed up late because the pandemic had thrown off his schedule.

Sometime around 2.a.m., Frank climbed the stairs and thought he saw a light on through the crack under Jordan's door.

"I was thinking I should stick my head in there and say, 'Hey, Jordan, go to sleep,'" Frank said. "And then I thought, 'Nah, I will give him a break.' And I go to the top of the stairs and made a right into my own bedroom."

He never saw his son alive again.

Jordan Tara's bedroom in Demarest. His collection of Guitar Hero video games (and other) hangs on the wall. (Pulitzer Center, NJ Advance Media)

Grieving alone

The night after Jordan's body was found, dozens of classmates gathered at Demarest's parking lot for an emotional candlelight vigil, an opportunity to grieve together as a community.

Then the police arrived to break it up.

The impromptu event violated the state's limit for an outdoor gathering. The pandemic seemed to interfere with grieving at every turn, Frank and Dara said.

Frank's mother lives in a nursing home, and their were no visitations allowed in April. He had to deliver the heartbreaking news that her 50-year-old grandson was dead over the phone.

The Falcos, who are friends, normally would have sat shiva, the customary week-long period of mourning with friends and family coming to consult Jordan's parents. Instead, there were no visitors. Just grief and heartbreak.

Gatherings limits also affected Jordan's funeral. Only 10 people could attend, including the rabbi and funeral home staff.

After a guard opposed the locked gates to the cemetery, Jordan's parents stood solemnly at the grave with his brother, his uncle and his grandmother.

The rabbi declined to hug Dara out of COVID-19 fears.

So did her own brother.

"If you have ever seen those old Western movies, it is like when they bury the bad guy and there is nobody there," Frank said regrettably. "It hurt that is what it felt like to me."

It underscored how disruptive the pandemic has been for Jordan's family. It made their heartbreak even more soul-crushing.

"The idea that he wasn't here was so unfathomable," Dara said. "It was just devastating."

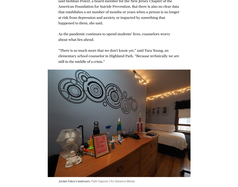
Trying to determine what students have been through over the past eight months has been one of the greatest challenges of the pandemic even as some teens return to the classroom, school counselors said.

"It's very hard to see, this is happening collectively," said Susan Tolman, clinical director at the Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide. "What we do know is that everyone — all of us, you and I included — are experiencing a threat level of stress. And have that manifests itself are the things we need to pay attention to."

It is not a foregone conclusion that the pandemic will lead to more suicides, said Jordana Jackson, a board member for the New Jersey Chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. But there is also no clear data showing the pandemic has prevented people who were already at risk from depression and anxiety or impacted by something that happened to them, she said.

As the pandemic continues to upend students' lives, counselors worry about what lies ahead.

"There is so much more that we don't know yet," said Tara Young, an elementary school counselor in Highland Park. "Because technically we are still in the middle of a crisis."



Jordan Tara's bedroom. (Pulitzer Center, NJ Advance Media)

Learning from loss

On the six month anniversary of Jordan's death, Frank and Dara sat on his perfectly made bed, beneath the music staff painted on his eggshell blue wall.

As they were photographed for this article, they held a framed photo of Jordan smiling, holding his tuba and giving a thumbs up. It's the same image they used for his obituary.

Many families who lose children to suicide are in denial or pressure medical examiners to label deaths as accidental to avoid the stigma. Some refuse to allow their children's school to reveal the cause of death to protect their privacy.

But the Falcos said they want people to remember Jordan's story. Most importantly, they want teens to know there is no shame in feeling depressed.

"If you know of someone who is having difficulties, you need to make sure they get help," Dara said. "Even if it ends up being as dramatic as someone being hospitalized."

Frank once asked Jordan if one of his friends had depression, too.

Jordan said he did, so Frank asked if all of Jordan's friends are depressed.

"He smirked at me and he said, "Dad, finding kids in high school who are depressed is like shooting fish in a barrel," Frank remembered.

In some ways, Frank and Dara still don't have closure.

Dara cries often. Frank has trained himself to recite the story of Jordan's death without losing his composure, he said. But when he talks about the future his son lost, his voice begins to quiver.

It wouldn't have mattered what career Jordan pursued or where he went to college. Frank just wanted his son to be a good person and a family man.

Most of all, he wanted Jordan to be happy.

"I spent the past couple of years thinking once he is over this, you know, then he is going to be just fine," Frank said.

***Editor's note**: If a child or youth has been impacted by depression, trauma, violence, defiant behavior and/or drug or alcohol use, New Jersey urges families to call the NJ Children's System of Care at 1-877-652-7624. It is open 24/7/365. The state's free or low-cost behavioral health system for kids up to age 21 provides eligible youth with coordinated access to in-home or community-based mental health supports, substance use treatment and services for intellectual or developmental disabilities.*

Frank and Dara Falco still struggle with the loss of their son, Jordan. Patti Sapone | NJ Advance Media

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