

### Your Turn

Frank and Dara Falco Guest columnists

Our son was not the loner wearing all black, in the back of the classroom. He wore T-shirts with puns, wore his hair big, loved to make people laugh, did well in class and participated in every music-related activity at his high school. He was loved by so many.

Jordan, 16, died suddenly and tragically on April 29 in Haworth. He suffered from severe clinical depression. It contributed to his death.

During Mental Health Awareness Month, we think everyone should know that depression doesn't always present as the lonely kid in black with his head down on his desk. You have to check in with everyone to make sure they're OK, especially now with the isolation caused by COVID-19. Silence is what creates a stigma around depression and suicide. Silence is what makes people think this is something we should not talk about.

Jordan's depression began about two years ago when he started at Northern Valley Regional High School (he was a junior this year). He talked to us and we got Jordan significant therapy, support and medical intervention. We tried to do everything to alleviate Jordan's pain, but it was not enough. There is nothing any of us could have done to prevent this. There's not a sentence anyone might have said or something anyone might have done that would have stopped this. A mind addled by clinical depression doesn't work properly and cannot be expected to think and act rationally. Jordan did a fantastic job of masking his depression, but was very, very sad and in a lot of pain for years.

Everyone looks for *one* reason it happened, as if life is a Sherlock Holmes mystery. There are a million reasons. The lockdowns and social distancing of COVID-19 didn't help. Jordan was segregated from his

friends, school activities and his job — all the things he set up to keep himself occupied and to develop coping mechanisms for his depression. He had been excited to work more at an after-care program so he could play games more with the children; it was a time he didn't have to worry about himself. All of that was removed — poof — when COVID-19 came.

Clinical depression needs to be handled by a pro. But during the coronavirus, interaction with his therapist and psychiatrist went from in-person meetings to calls, whether video or old-school phone. It is harder to pick up cues when someone is just a voice on a phone.

We also implore parents to have a good relationship with your child's friends. Establish a rapport with them so they will feel comfortable talking to you. Kids can't help other kids with depression. Professionals go through years of studying and training before they can. A friend of a depressed kid is not equipped with the necessary knowledge and experience to deal with this disease. They are also not equipped to carry the responsibility of someone else's mental health. They are certainly not equipped to bear the guilt if something should go wrong. If a friend is telling you, or even hinting that they are contemplating hurting themselves you need to tell an adult. Yeah, squeal on them. You owe it to them, their family, their friends and yourself to tell someone who can help.

After Jordan's death, the quarantine lockdowns did not stop Northern Valley students from memorializing him. On the evening following his death, numerous students attended an impromptu candlelight vigil for Jordan at the Demarest Gazebo before authorities halted it due to curfew during the COVID-19 crisis. After the vigil, more than 100 candles were left at the scene. On May 6, students wore the school colors, blue and white, in a show of solidarity and reflection. The school's music department has gathered virtually to celebrate Jordan's life.

Jordan would have turned 17 on May 8, and was scheduled to take his driver's test. Instead, about 60 cars

full of Jordan's classmates and their crying moms drove by our home. They were holding birthday signs, balloons and condolences. The "Caravan of Care" was organized by Jordan's school. To honor his memory, Jordan's loved ones also performed acts of kindness on his birthday, such as donating to feed the homeless. Jordan's heart has stopped beating, but his love endures.

Jordan was kind, exuberant, willing to help those in need, and played multiple musical instruments. He was a prankster with a mischievous yet harmless sense of humor and an infectious smile.

We never talked widely about Jordan's struggles because Jordan's depression was his story to share, if and when he wanted to. Jordan died because he had a disease that is very much misunderstood. As painful as it is, we share our story so you might understand.

*Frank and Dara Falco live in Demarest.*



**Jordan Falco**