



‘YOU MATTER’

South Eugene holds suicide prevention soccer games after losing teammate

ABOVE: South Eugene’s Bela Donahue, center, leads her team in a cheer before their match against Willamette on Tuesday.

PHOTOS BY CHRIS PIETSCH/THE REGISTER-GUARD

Miranda Cyr Eugene Register-Guard | USA TODAY NETWORK

South Eugene High School students pushed for suicide awareness soccer games after seeing fellow classmates struggle with mental health. They found new meaning after losing a teammate a week before the games were set to begin. ● South Eugene’s boys and girls soccer teams have been planning their Axe Soccer Suicide Awareness games for more than a year. The games were initially planned for mid-September. ● On Sept. 6, Lyla Lauderbach, the 17-year-old South Eugene High senior and varsity soccer team captain, drove through a guardrail and into a tree. She was the only passenger in the car. **See GAME, Page 5A**



Wearing T-shirts that read, “You Matter,” South Eugene soccer players Bela Donahue, center, and Sarah Money meet with officials and captains from Willamette before their match on Tuesday.

Game

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According to Lane County Sgt. Thomas Speldrich, the police have no way of knowing what caused Lauderbach to crash, but there was no evidence of a crime, intoxication or distracted driving. There was no roadway evidence of braking.

The games were re-scheduled to this week.

“These games aren’t just in response to one scenario – this idea was brought up by last year’s captains, last year’s team,” Charlie Lacey, a senior and captain of the varsity boys soccer team, said. “This would have happened no matter what went on, no matter what the circumstances were. But I think it means even more to us now.”

The girls junior varsity and varsity games were held Tuesday. The girls wore custom purple and teal jerseys – the colors that represent suicide awareness and prevention. On the back of their shirts the quote “You Matter” was written.

The boys’ teams will wear similar custom jerseys at their games Friday.

“Throughout the struggles, emotionally, of this month, it’s been very easy to be there for one another, especially with the boys and girls teams,” said Bela Donahue, a junior and captain of the varsity girl’s soccer team, said. “The promoting of these games has also really brought us together. It feels very rewarding to be able to be there for other people and then receive the same support back.”

The girls also wrote



The South Eugene girls soccer team members wear teammate Lyla Lauderbach’s name and number on their legs during their game against Willamette. Lauderbach died in a one-car crash on Sept. 6.

CHRIS PIETSCH/THE REGISTER-GUARD

“Lyla #2” on their legs in purple paint, a reminder of Lauderbach’s jersey number.

“This season was like a big struggle for our team to get through and play games and practice,” junior and member of the varsity soccer leadership team Mimi Bouressa said. “I think the reason that we are still doing it is just because of our relationships with each other and how close our team is. We all feel really passionate about continuing to play and that’s for her (Lauderbach).”

Donahue echoed that. “In hard times like this, it’s very easy to just give up and let it all go,” she said. “I know at least for me and a lot of people in our team, the only reason that I’m still playing is solely for Lyla and for my team. To get through the rest of the season, because I know that it would be really important to her.”

Starting peer-to-peer communication

For the soccer teams, it was important that they be the ones leading the movement on suicide awareness, not the administration.

“It’s definitely touched a lot more students,” Donahue said. “(It’s been) a little bit more impactful and deeper than maybe it would have coming from administration.”

Donahue said school staff has been supportive of their efforts in organizing the games and the school-wide advocacy.

Bouressa added that the response from classmates has been great. She said students often feel more comfortable talking with their peers because it can be difficult to start those conversations with teachers or other authority figures.

“We want to provide resources, coming from us as students who care,” Bouressa said. “The main purpose is just to talk about it because we found that the best way to help others right now is just to talk about it and make it not an uncomfortable conversation to have, because that is more dangerous for people who are struggling – to feel shameful.”

The soccer teams coordinated a video compiling statistics, resources and reassuring words from a number of their teammates to present to

the school. They also made custom cause bracelets and put up posters around the high school, raising awareness.

The teammates referenced statistics about how suicide affects youth in the United States and in Oregon. Suicide was the second leading cause of death among youth under age 25 in Oregon in 2020, according to Oregon Health Authority’s Youth Suicide Invention and Prevention Plan report from 2021.

The students said they’ve seen the effects the COVID-19 pandemic has had on their fellow classmates’ mental health.

Donahue said social distancing and remote learning caused a feeling of isolation for students, but she wants them to know there are always people they can talk to.

The students want to open up conversations about mental health and suicide to help destigmatize the topic not just at their school, but in the broader Eugene community.

They wanted to remind people that there’s always someone out there who cares.

“I haven’t been a part of many teams that are as tight-knit as my team is right now this year,” Lacey said. “This project kind of embodies all of our values. We were here as individuals, but we’re also here as, like, a team. We’re here as a family, we’re here as a community, and that doesn’t just stay within our program, but that goes across the entire school, all of Eugene.”

How to get help

There are a number of

resources available to individuals struggling with mental health issues:

- Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: 988
- Crisis Text Line: Text OREGON to 741741
- White Bird Crisis Intervention: (541) 687-4000
- Looking Glass Youth & Family Crisis: (541) 689-3111
- Mental Health Crisis Response Program: (888) 989-9990
- South Lane Mental Health Crisis Counsel: (541) 942-3939
- PeaceHealth Emergency Department: (458) 209-5555

Miranda Cyr reports on education for The Register-Guard. You can contact her at mcyr@register-guard.com or find her on Twitter @mirandab-cyr.

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Ron Bush, JD
Seniors Real Estate Specialist
Licensed in Oregon



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