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April 23, 2007

Massacre in Virginia Requires Us to Heed Warning Signs

“He showed so many classic signs,” states Sherry Crosthwait, Director of Suicide Prevention Outreach Programs of HeartLine, Inc. “The social withdrawal, depression, talking about and depicting death and violence on top of long-term bizarre behaviors. His sudden absence from classes the month before the shootings was another sign. It is vital that we pay attention to the warnings and intervene with comprehensive mental health treatment before a tragedy occurs.” Cho Seung-Hui horrified the world when he gunned down 32 people in two separate attacks at Virginia Tech before taking his own life last Monday.

School shootings, youth suicides and related violence have become alarmingly prevalent. School officials in Central Oklahoma recognize the importance of early identification of at-risk students and many area schools utilize Crosthwait’s program in an effort to prevent such tragedies. The Healthy Education for Life Program (HELP) includes information on the impact of depression, school and parental issues, substance abuse and other youth-related challenges and helps identify at-risk students. Following the presentations, over 10% of youth have self-identified that they have considered harming themselves or are currently thinking about attempting suicide. These students are directly referred for additional mental health treatment. The video-based program currently reaches approximately 5,000 Central Oklahoma youth annually. Suicide is the second leading cause of death in Oklahoma for youth ages 10-24.

"HeartLine believes that education and identification are the keys to prevention," states Sherry Crosthwait. "We have increased demands for presentations to youth through schools, faith groups, colleges and community organizations and we need to emphasize that early detection of these at-risk students can not only save that young person’s life, but can also prevent a horrible disaster from occurring as well." Mark Thompson, HeartLine Board Vice-President and HELP presenter, maintains, “Each time I make a presentation I am helping to dispel the stigma that attaches to the despair accompanying suicidal thoughts of teenagers, I’m letting teens know that they are not alone and I’m providing them with an avenue in which they can seek help. The act of letting a suicidal teen know that a total stranger is willing to volunteer their time to show they care can actually mean the difference between that young person deciding to die or choosing to live. I can’t think of anything more important or more rewarding that I could do to give back to the community in which I live.”

HeartLine operates two twenty-four hour national suicide prevention lifelines, 1-800-273-TALK (8255) and 1-800- SUICIDE (784-2433) as well as a CareLine 848-CARE (2273) and provides call specialists trained in crisis intervention and compassionate listening skills to speak with callers in need. For more information or to request a presentation, contact Crosthwait at 840-9396, email scrosthwait@heartlineoklahoma.org or visit www.heartlineoklahoma.org.

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