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Rye Neck High School

In 2015, my grandfather died.

I remember my mother sitting at the kitchen table quietly sobbing, while my brother and I asked our father questions; we ultimately discovered that he had died of "a sickness in his brain."

Last March, ten years after my grandfather's passing, we held a small celebration of life, spreading some remaining ashes on his memorial tree. Prior to the ceremony, my parents sat us down, finally ready to tell the whole truth. "Your Papi's sickness was not physical; it was mental. He took his own life." The anguish and shock felt as though he had died all over again. I could not wrap my head around the fact that this had actually happened to my family, but I knew I needed to take the pain I felt and turn it into a positive impact on my community.

Throughout my junior and senior years, I worked alongside the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) to bring awareness to my school. In late spring, I contacted the head of the AFSP's Westchester Chapter, as well as the health teacher, principal, and guidance counselor of my school, to express and plan my hopes for this project. My goal, driven by my personal experience with my grandfather, was to make students aware of the mental struggles surrounding the decision to end one's life, and hopefully prevent others from having to suffer the pain of losing a loved one. I organized a team for a local suicide walk and brought in speakers to health classes, opening the door for students to talk about this sensitive and historically taboo subject. In the end, my team raised over \$2,600, and just under fifty people signed up to walk for my Rye Neck team. The head of the AFSP Westchester Chapter came to the school and spoke to the entire Grade 10 class during health classes, allowing for personal discussion and mental support in case of distress. This presentation will now be incorporated into future health class curricula, establishing suicide awareness in all students starting with the class of 2029 when they are sophomores.

Over the course of this project, I spent a lot of time and energy towards turning my dreams into a reality. I would estimate that I spent 50+ hours of my time on this awareness initiative, however, I did not keep track of my exact hours worked. This project was never about the potential of earning an award or gaining community service hours, I was simply trying to serve my community.

Witnessing the direct effects of suicide has been shocking, yet eye-opening: people struggle in silence so often, and it can be impossible to know what others are going through. Harnessing my experiences to turn them into this awareness initiative has been one of my greatest accomplishments throughout my high school career. Knowing that I have left such a significant impact on my fellow students and community has only made me more determined to make a difference in the world, and I am excited to continue pursuing volunteerism for the causes that mean the most to me.