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Connecting with those who are struggling

By CATHERINE FERRIS
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Local children collaborated with the Care Coalition to paint supportive messages on rocks.
Courtesy Deanna Ricciardi

When tragedy strikes, a community comes together.

About a year ago, Eastchester resident Deanna Ricciardi's good friend tragically lost a child.

“We needed to do something,” she said. “So, 14 of us gathered together.”

They formed the Care Coalition and started doing outreach to help inspire love and support for people in all age groups who struggle with substance abuse, addiction and other life challenges.

Most recently, the coalition brought local children together to paint rocks with messages against bullying, substance abuse and suicide.

“These rocks will be placed all around town with the hopes of making someone smile,” Ricciardi said.

A member of the coalition brought the idea to the group following a church service where she saw parishioners writing positive messages on rocks.

This kind of outreach isn’t aimed solely at teens struggling with depression and in danger of suicide, Ricciardi said, adding she hopes people of all ages and backgrounds can take something away from these efforts.

“We’re hoping this is just a stepping stone for other people who are struggling,” she said. “We want to educate and raise knowledge and awareness.”

Ricciardi said the group has learned from one another, as well as from the teens in the community. They learned what sorts of resources work and what is needed for the younger generation, and they plan to continue collaborating on any future events, she said.

Part of the outreach includes updating and keeping the coalition’s website tangible and interactive.

“We’re not professionals, we’re just people who are doing our best,” she said.

That website, which can be found at lovenevergivesup.com, has a host of things people can click through, such as testimonials, a directory of resources, hotlines and upcoming events.

The group meets the first Thursday of every month at 7:30 p.m. at the American Legion on Bell Road to spend time praying and discussing what they can do to provide more help, love and outreach.

“You hear about [tragedies] on the news and it’s in your mind,” Ricciardi said. “We can become very desensitized ... But when it hits close to home, something can happen.”

The need to take action led to the coalition concept, which took off relatively quickly.

A video diaries project launched by the group shows people sharing their stories about growing up or living in difficult environments, but the purpose is to show there are others experiencing the same thing.

The first such testimonial came from Laurence Torr of the U.K.

Torr said his mother was a drug addict and he grew up with drugs and violence. At 5 years old, he was rolling joints, but that chain broke when he went to boarding school and accepted religion into his life. Today, he has raised his own family and saw that his brother kicked his own habit.

Kaely Leeyer, a parishioner at Scarsdale Community Baptist Church, said she was raised in an environment with sexual and physical abuse, which caused her to feel shameful. The way she coped with those feelings was through drugs and alcohol. Eventually, she found people who showed her love and support, which allowed her to find sobriety.

“I love their mission,” Leeyer said. “Part of the process of getting clean is getting love. You need the support of the community. People have come together as a community and put the outreach out there.”

Leeyer, a former Scarsdale resident now living in White Plains, works with Scarsdale Baptist Church to lead support groups for people dealing with sexual abuse.

She said her addiction’s underlying trauma stemmed from her own abuse.

But because of the support and love from her community, Leeyer managed to get clean.

Though many of the people involved in the program have a Christian or Catholic background, Ricciardi said anyone who wants to be a part of the group is welcome, regardless of where they come from or what their faith is.

“Not everyone is struggling in the same way, sometimes they don’t even know why they’re struggling,” Ricciardi said. “We’re not here to judge anyone or to tell them what they need to do. We just want to be a helping hand in the community.”

Ricciardi said the group is currently planning its second annual candlelight vigil in memory of those affected by substance abuse. The first vigil took place May 30.

For more information, visit lovenevergivesup.com or email thecarecoalition@gmail.com.

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