

Katie Johnson: Good morning, and welcome to Apple a Day, Lake Region Healthcare's Health and Wellness segment, where we feature news and information you can use, to live a healthier life. This is Katie Johnson, and my guest today is Maria Willits. Maria is an LPN here at Lake Region Healthcare in the Psychiatry Department, in our Clinic Services, and she's also a Suicide Awareness and Prevention Advocate, who's here to talk to us about a special event being planned, around that very topic. Good morning, Maria.

Maria Willits: Good morning, Katie. Thank you for having me.

Katie Johnson: Thank you so much for joining me. We are planning a Shatter the Silence 5K, and I'm excited to talk with you more about that, and let our listeners know about it this morning. Let's start by just giving a little bit of history behind this event. How and why did it get started?

Maria Willits: Shatter the Silence began in 2010, as the result of the suicide death of my son. So, myself, our family, and some of my son's friends, decided to organize and host a 5K walk and [race 00:01:02] day, in memory of him and to raise money to donate somewhere, somehow to raise awareness about suicide and mental health issues. It wasn't long after he had passed away, that I learned that in our school systems in the rural areas, and in the rural areas period, there's not a whole lot being done, or at that time, there wasn't a whole lot being done for suicide awareness and prevention, in educating our youth on what to do if a friend comes to them and tells them they're suicidal. That was our main goal, was really to get the awareness out there, and try and figure out a way to bring education into our schools and communities.

Katie Johnson: Tell me a little bit about what community members can expect, or why we ask them, why we think it's important that they participate in an event like this.

Maria Willits: First and foremost, it takes a community to prevent suicide. It takes a collective effort of everybody to be educated, to be aware of the signs and symptoms of depression, the signs and symptoms of somebody who's in a suicidal crisis. Everybody needs to be watching out for each other, and that's one of the main reasons why it's so important for community members to become involved.

Katie Johnson: Absolutely true. What kind of statistics are there now about suicide? Are we seeing any significant trends or changes in suicide rates?

Maria Willits: Suicide rates have been increasing. They're definitely going up right now. According to the CDC and Minnesota Department of Health, someone dies every 12.8 minutes in the United States, by suicide. The highest suicide rates in the United States are among 45 to 64 year olds. In Minnesota, the highest rates are among 35 to 49 year olds right now. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15 to 24 year olds, in the United States. It's the second leading cause of death among 15 to 24 year olds in Minnesota and North Dakota.

Katie Johnson: Those are very troubling statistics.

Maria Willits: Absolutely, and one thing that I learned just a few years ago, and this still stands true, is that suicide rates are 20% fewer in the Seven-county Twin Cities metro area, than in our rural areas. So, the rates are higher in the rural areas.

Katie Johnson: It's really important work, that you're doing to raise this awareness, and we really want to invite people to participate. People who may not have any past history, this is a great chance to learn, to become part of that community, that just shows that they care. So, let's tell people how they can participate.

Maria Willits: Absolutely. We have online registration at active.com. Also, people can register at the event, the day of the event. That is not an issue at all. We'll be ready for that. Just show up. Registration starts at 5:00. We'll have a short program at 6:00, where we're going to have a guest speaker. We're hoping to have someone who has battled depression their whole life, be there to speak. Also, we have designated a person, or a school actually, for this year's grant. So, we're hoping to have a speaker from that school present also, for the brief program before the walk/run begins.

Katie Johnson: Okay. I think we have not mentioned the date yet. We probably should make sure we mention that at least a couple of times.

Maria Willits: Saturday, September 30th.

Katie Johnson: Right. So, we're planning for the end of September. People have plenty of time, even if they maybe feel like they need to get out and practice a little bit, you've got a few weeks to do that.

Maria Willits: Absolutely, and it is a walk/run, so it's not required to run. Also, you do not have to walk the whole 5K or 3.2 miles, just whatever you're comfortable with.

Katie Johnson: Right. We're really mostly interested in just having people come, and be part of the event. Again, on Saturday, September 30th.

Maria Willits: Right.

Katie Johnson: Any age limits, or anything like that?

Maria Willits: There are no age limits. It's open for the whole family. The whole family is welcome, definitely. It is an evening event, as everybody is probably aware now that I said it starts at 5:00. Our registration starts at 5:00. The reason it's an evening event, is because we are going to have a luminary walk/run. A lot like Relay for Life. So, anybody who comes and registers, or who has pre-registered, will get a luminary bag and tealight, and you can decorate that in memory of your loved one, if you've lost somebody. If you know someone who's lost someone, and you just want to have a luminary there to represent them, and to remember them, that's

fine as well. If somebody cannot participate, but would like to sponsor a luminary bag, they certainly can do that as well, and the luminary bags for people who aren't participating will be \$10.00 for a luminary bag, or \$15.00 for two.

Katie Johnson: You mentioned that the grant recipient for this year has been chosen already, so I presume that means that there's a cost to participate, but then those funds are going somewhere as well. Tell us a little bit more about that.

Maria Willits: Absolutely. Registration fees are based on age. We don't want to exclude anyone, so we try to keep our fees down, and appropriate for the age ranges. Ages six and under are free. Seven to 14 is \$10.00. College-aged students or school-aged ... High school and college aged students, 15 to 24, the registration fee is \$15.00, and then 25 and older is \$20.00. With the money that we've raised through participation and sponsorships around the community, will go towards donating to an area school or community, for them to use for suicide awareness and prevention efforts. There's different ways that they can use that for that purpose, but it's specifically for suicide awareness and prevention.

Katie Johnson: I'm curious if you think that participating in these events, we've already talked about participating as just a community member, and the community aspect of it, but for someone who's experienced a loss through death by suicide, do you think these events can serve a purpose there, in terms of healing?

Maria Willits: I can definitely speak from personal experience, that yes, these events are very healing. First of all, when you lose somebody to suicide, you feel alone. It's been so terribly stigmatized for so many years, that when you gather at an event like this, you see that there's others out there that are experiencing some of the same things that you've experienced. There's healing and comfort in the numbers, in being surrounded by people who understand you, and understand what you're going through, and what your families went through, and what your loved one has went through. So, absolutely. There's a huge, huge healing aspect to these events.

Katie Johnson: So, we do want to invite anyone and everyone, like you said, families, all ages, come and to be a part of this community event to shatter the silence, as you said around the topic, to break those stigmas, to support one another, to become educated, and to do whatever we all can do to prevent a suicide in our community. I appreciate the work that you've done. Anything else you want our listeners to know about the event, and what will be happening on September 30th?

Maria Willits: Just come prepared for the weather. The only way that we would reschedule or cancel this event, is if there was some kind of a storm that put our participants [inaudible 00:08:38] injured. We just want everybody to please come, and support our efforts, and be a part of this. This is one of the first, I do believe it's the first, community walk/run for suicide awareness and prevention in Fergus Falls, so we're really excited about it, and we hope that everybody will come out and join in this effort.

Katie Johnson: So, one more time, let's give the date, the time, the location, and where they can

find more information.

Maria Willits: So, the date is September 30th. That's a Saturday. Registration begins at 5:00. The walk/run will begin at sundown. The walk/run is going to be at DeLagoon Park. The trail will go on the Central Lakes Trail. Registration can be found at active.com, and people can come and register the day of the event. Contact information for myself, if you want to email me is [willits, W-I-L-L-I-T-S 4 Shatter the Silence at gmail.com](mailto:willits, W-I-L-L-I-T-S 4 Shatter the Silence@gmail.com), and cell phone number is (218) 671-1805. Please contact me, if you have any questions.

Katie Johnson: Awesome. Maria Willits, thank you for your work in organizing the Shatter the Silence 5K, to be held on September 30th. Maria, you are a great suicide awareness and prevention advocate, and we are lucky to have you on our team, as an LPN in our Psychiatry Department, as well. Thanks for joining me this morning.

Maria Willits: Thank you, Katie.

Katie Johnson: Maria and Katie reminding you, that there is so much to do here. Stay healthy for it. Have a great day.