

Foundation spreads social anxiety education/awareness

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Andrew Kukes was the co-captain of his varsity tennis team, senior class valedictorian and accepted into the college of his dreams, Princeton University.

But he also suffered from a little-known and debilitating illness that eventually caused him to take his own life: a performance-based affliction, known as: “social anxiety”.

“We noticed very early on, when he was three or four years old,” said his mother, Patty Kukes of east Florida, which is where the family moved from Royal Oak when Andrew was two-years-old. “It was something we just saw as shyness. We thought he’d outgrow it.”

“It evolved into this extreme fear of performing around people, thinking they would judge him, deep embarrassment,” explained his father, Jeff Kukes.

Now, three years after his death at the age of 30, his parents (who are divorced) have started a new national foundation aimed at reducing the chances that other sufferers, their family members and friends, never have to take that same, crippling journey that Andrew and his family traveled, lost, confused and frequently, alone.

“We want families to be aware,” said Jeff Kukes. “They need to be involved and not just think things will work out. Kids need to be out there engaging. If they aren’t, they need get help as soon as possible. The younger they are, the better the outcome.”

The Andrew Kukes Foundation, in cooperation with Macomb County Community Mental Health, presents: Misunderstood No More, a free workshop on social anxiety from 2 to 4 p.m., Sept. 27 at the Sterling Inn.

The event features a showcase presentation by social anxiety expert and author, Jonathan Berent, who will discuss the effects on children, adolescents and adults.

John Kinch, executive director of Macomb County Community Mental Health said the problem is more common than first believed and can affect small children, including Kindergartners, pre-teens, college students required to do public speaking, graduates and rookie job-holders, suddenly facing real-world, professional demands – and even senior citizens.

“I think a lot of people experience it, but they haven’t had somebody speak to them about it,” said Kinch, adding that it’s MCCMH’s mission to increase awareness regarding mental health issues and share resources. “Education and support can make a big difference in someone’s life, but I don’t think social anxiety ever fully goes away.”

Jeff Kukes said the foundation’s goals are three-fold: to empower sufferers and their families, share resources and increase awareness, including among mental health professionals. Mental health experts who attend the presentation can earn education credits.

“Andrew was smart, athletic, popular – he always had a lot of friends! – but when other kids started to date, he did not,” Patty Kukes said. “He was never able to mature to that.” The Kukes knew something was radically wrong when Andrew arrived at Princeton, then dropped out within a few weeks because “he couldn’t relate to anyone.”

His smarts got him into Columbia University, where a close friend from high school had also ended up. With his friend’s support – and a private room – Andrew was able to get through, and even enjoy earning his four-year degree.

After college, however, paralyzing fear kept him from getting and keeping a job, and though he searched long and hard for help and a solution to his pain, Andrew eventually took his own life. To reserve a spot at the conference, visit www.mccmh.net, or call MCCMH at (586)307-8258. The Sterling Inn is located at 34911 Van Dyke in Sterling Heights.

For more information about social anxiety or the Andrew Kukes Foundation, visit:
www.akfsa.org

http://www.macombdaily.com/article/20120925/LIFE01/120929707/foundation-spreads-social-anxiety-education-awareness&pager=full_story