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MEDIA RELEASE

January 18, 1988

UM PROFESSOR, YOUTH COURT OFFICER COMBAT TEEN SUICIDE

By Carol Susan Woodruff
UM News and Publications

A University of Montana social work professor has joined forces with a Missoula Youth Court officer to combat teen suicide, a problem that's risen to national prominence in recent years.

Last year, Professor Bob Deaton was the main organizer of a conference on teen suicide held in Missoula and cosponsored by UM's social work department and the state chapter of the National Association of Social Workers.

He and Morgan, a UM faculty affiliate who directs the Fourth Judicial District's Intensive Counseling Program, also were instrumental in forming the Missoula Community Task Force on Teen Suicide Prevention.

Chaired by Morgan, the group drew up guidelines for how schools should deal with teen suicide. The group also surveyed local mental health professionals who work with suicidal youths and their families and shared its findings with schools and agencies.

"You really have to know specific individuals who can be useful and will be available to kids and families beyond 8-5," Deaton says of the need to choose a counselor carefully.

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He and Morgan have led training programs and continuing-education weekend seminars on teen suicide throughout the state, as well as in Idaho and Washington. The seminars usually attract 60-80 teachers, school counselors, social and youth workers, drug and alcohol counselors, parents and other interested community members.

"We always have people who have recently lost their younger family member to suicide come to these," Deaton says. "They need a forum where they can share this experience."

During their programs, Deaton and Morgan discuss introducing the subject of suicide to young people and recognizing suicidal behavior. They cover the incidence and causes of suicide, as well as how schools can help prevent it, intervene in attempts, and handle the period after a suicide or other tragic death.

Deaton and Morgan think adults must give teens clear information about suicide. "They hear about it on the news, and we know they talk about it among themselves," Deaton says. "By not talking to them about it, we're telling them it's too bad to talk about or that we don't believe it happens."

Clearly, it does happen. Morgan says that nationally, about 6,400 people aged 15-19 commit suicide every year. He points out that although that doesn't sound like a lot of people, over 10 years, the total would be 64,000 -- 6,000 more Americans than died in the Vietnam War.

In the past few years, Deaton adds, it's become evident that a considerable number of 8-12-year-olds nationwide also commit suicide.

He says that in Montana, suicide -- the No. 2 cause of death in this country among people aged 15-24, after accidents -- claimed 25 people in that age group in 1985. He estimates another 30 suicides in that group in 1986.

Deaton says a bigger problem than suicide is suicidal behavior, which yearly causes countless accidents. "If somebody commits suicide, he only kills himself," he says. "But when somebody does some self-destructive behavior -- especially in an automobile -- he very frequently kills another person or permanently injures him."

Today, people know a lot more about the causes of suicide and the symptomatic behavior than they used to, Deaton says. Causes include the loss of status or a relationship, violence in the family, and parents' divorce or over-emphasis on achievement.

Suicidal teens may show sudden changes in behavior, including becoming happy almost overnight. Other clues are drinking or taking drugs, withdrawing, fighting with family members, and giving away possessions.

Morgan says many of the problems teens experience today -- including suicidal behavior -- stem from the vast societal changes of the past 20 years. "This generation of teen-agers is

one of the most difficult we've ever had to deal with," he says. "It's fraught with moral and ethical purposelessness."

He says children no longer enjoy the stability they did about 25 years ago, in the era of extended families and close-knit neighborhoods. Single parents and two-income families are struggling to survive, with little time left for children. He adds that baby boomers -- part of the "me generation" -- are geared toward meeting their own needs, not their children's.

"There's no one around for the kids anymore," Morgan says, "so we've created all kinds of things for kids to do -- things for which we don't accept failure."

To keep their children from committing suicide, Morgan says, parents must keep their marriage healthy and create a loving environment in which family members enjoy activities and solve problems together. He says single parents can help their children feel cared for and worthwhile by encouraging them to form healthy relationships with other adults.

Morgan stresses that in dealing with suicidal teens, adults should focus on teens' desire to avoid emotional pain, not death; death is a nebulous concept for them.

Deaton explains that teens don't think they'll really die if they commit suicide. He tells of a girl who, after attempting suicide, said, "It's like a video game. You put in your quarter and play the death game. Even if you lose, it's just a game you can play again. It's not real."

Everyone can help with suicide prevention and intervention, Morgan says. Approaches include listening to teens in a non-judgmental way, defining their problems and possible solutions to them, and getting qualified help quickly.

Deaton says schools can't become suicide-prevention centers rather than educational institutions. But he and Morgan believe schools must have guidelines for dealing with suicidal students, including ones for getting outside help or contacting parents.

They say schools should also train all employees to deal with suicidal behavior and teach students about suicide, self-esteem building, problem-solving and peer-counseling. It's especially important to tell students they should never promise a friend not to reveal his plan to commit suicide, Deaton says.

Deaton and Morgan add that schools must be prepared to offer "post-vention" activities -- things done after the tragic death of a student. Those activities include informing people at the school of the student's death in a timely, humane way; offering informal counseling; and holding a memorial service in keeping with the family's wishes.

Deaton says such activities are powerful suicide-prevention tools. "They help kids deal with the reality of death -- that their buddy is dead as a mackerel, and he's not coming back."

Deaton and Morgan have led teacher-training programs in Billings, Anaconda and Glendive and UM continuing-education

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weekend courses in Kalispell, Great Falls, Helena, Butte and Livingston. In February, they'll offer another course in Anaconda.

Morgan says they've gotten many compliments on the programs, including calls from people who say that what they learned during the courses has helped them save a child's life.

On the subject of saving a child's life, Morgan offers one last bit of advice.

"We can no longer assume that our kids know we want them to live, because so much around them is filled with violence and destruction," he says. "We need to tell our kids that we want them to live and that we'll do everything in our power to ensure that they will live."

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