

Home sweet home

Parents come together to create innovative housing plan for those with special needs

By **MATT GEIGER**
Mount Horeb Mail

When Susan Wallitsch was diagnosed with cancer a few years ago, her first thought was not about her own fate.

What would happen to her beloved adult son, Frank? Who would care for him, and who would make sure his ebullient, larger-than-life presence was able to continue enriching the lives of those he meets?

"That's what I was most afraid of," she remembers. "That's what I lay awake at night thinking about. Who will do all the things I do for Frank?"

"Having cancer is a crisis,"

she continues. "But for Frank to lose his caregiver, that's a bigger crisis."

Like an estimated one in every 59 children, Frank has been identified with autism spectrum disorder.

His mother, Susan, and his father, Mark, see a sensitive, intelligent person beneath atypical motor skills and verbal communication challenges. But Frank is not merely their son. He is his own person. So are all of the 424,000 people with autism who are currently on a waiting list for residential services in the United States.

That's why Susan, Mark and a group of other area parents of children with special needs

have banded together to build a one-of-a-kind housing development that they hope will serve as a model for people all across the country.

In its early stages, the quest seemed epic at best and quixotic at worst. Yet somehow, through a combination of savvy and persistence grounded upon their love for their children and their dream that they may someday find independence and support in a special housing facility in New Glarus, that dream is close to becoming a reality.

The project has garnered big headlines. It was recently profiled on National Public Radio and in the *Washington Post*.

continued on page 9



Frank Wallitsch, pictured above with his parents, Susan and Mark, at their Mount Horeb house, is one of the people who inspired a new housing development in New Glarus called Home Of Our Own (HOOO). Photo by Matt Geiger.

A glimmer of light

The family of Ben Cullen brings a message of hope to Mount Horeb

By **MATT GEIGER**
Mount Horeb Mail

Benjamin Cullen's suicide note said he couldn't see any light at the end of the tunnel.

As his mother lay over his body, rubbing her hands through his hair, kissing him, trying to come to terms with a shattered world, she decided that Ben, who would have turned 32 this month, who had been unable to find the light for



Benjamin Cullen (second from right) lost his life to suicide four years ago. Today, his family is using their grief to fuel a mission to help others. Photo contributed.

himself, would have to become a light for others.

"I kept kissing him and saying, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I had no idea,'" she remembers, fresh tears rushing to the surface as she remembers a four-year-old tragedy. "Then a calm came over me and I realized some good had to come from this. God told me Ben would save others."

And he has.

Ben, who took his own life in November of 2014, has saved countless lives following his death.

Patti and Terry Cullen live in Platteville, where they were born and raised. They

were high school sweethearts, and they had three seemingly happy, healthy children who they guided into adulthood.

They were as familiar with ordinary loss as any family, but then a different kind of tragedy struck. Their oldest and only son died by suicide. Everything was forever changed.

"It completely blindsided the entire family," Patti says.

"Not having any knowledge of mental health, it was just so devastating – to be judged, to be embarrassed, to be hurt," she remembers.

"People don't know how to approach you or treat you,"

continued on page 5

'Recipe for disaster'

Mount Horeb Village Board says time is running out to stop CHC power line

By **MATT GEIGER**
Mount Horeb Mail

The Mount Horeb Village Board on Friday issued a joint statement denouncing a proposed power line that they say would diminish property values and prevent future land development.

"The 175-foot towers of the proposed Cardinal-Hickory Creek 345-kilovolt high-voltage transmission line (CHC

HVTL) would surround Mount Horeb on two sides and run directly through the town of Springdale," reads the board's statement, which was sent to media and the Wisconsin Public Service Commission. "On behalf of our constituents, we have reviewed the potential effect of the transmission line on the Mount Horeb area and have been working to persuade state regulators to reject the proposal."

The board went on to say the line would "be a negative economic impact on our community's future."

"When a HVTL is built near a community, property values there decline, whether the line directly affects the property or not," they wrote. "Property owners may be unable to sell their homes and land at the price they deserve. A decline in property tax revenue requires local governments (county,

school district, village) to find ways to replace that revenue, often at the expense of other properties in the community."

"Lastly, the proposed location of the CHC HVTL towers is in areas of the community where future growth is planned," they continued. "The ability to add new businesses and housing is diminished when HVTL lines are built through and next to a community like ours. So, new construction is

limited and tax rates could go up. This is a recipe for financial disaster."

"It is important for all of us to address these potential impacts while we still have the chance," the statement concluded. "But time is running out. To learn more about making your voice heard, please look for more information and updates at NoATC.com and in the *Mount Horeb Mail*."

SHARING

continued from page 3

to protect, without question, the confidentiality of any information received," Salerno said. "To do anything other than that is an extreme trust-buster."

Salerno predicted any new agreement would attempt to improve on the existing pathways for information sharing between the school district and the police department.

"If we dodge a bullet by both kids not coming to the dance, we still have an issue come 8:00 am on Monday morning," Salerno said. "If we had that

relationship, things could be a little more fluid."

Salerno said he was unaware of any existing agreement with the police department above and beyond the state statutes, saying he was working to be sure the school board and administrative team were in agreement for a starting point for future conversations with law enforcement.

"Our rights for getting police reports are just as it would be for any public entity seeking a public records request," Salerno said. "Sometimes, they are redacted. It can come within ten days, so by then the threat

may have passed or is still pending and we don't have all the pieces to the puzzle. We're really trying to get at having as much real time information in order to make informed decisions about student and staff security. What we're trying to do is build an agreement that we think represents what we need."

It is current practice to automatically notify the police department whenever a crime is committed on school grounds.

"How you treat someone the first time they've been involved in a fight is very different than how you treat them the fourth

time they've been involved in a fight," Salerno said, saying previous instances may not have happened on campus.

"I wonder if it will take any flexibility away from us," Piscitelli said, suggesting students with individual educational plans might benefit from a different approach.

"Breaking the law is breaking the law, regardless of whether you have a disability," said Brian Johnson, student services administrator. "However, there is going to be an occasional exception, potentially, if you have a student with, maybe, a significant intellectual dis-

ability, if the intent isn't to hurt somebody. Maybe they're just having a really hard time and there is an accidental injury. That would be different."

"The law is pretty clear," Salerno said.

The board directed Salerno to open talks with police chief Jeff Veloff about the potential specifics of an agreement, using Salerno's initial draft as a starting point.

"I think it's a good framework for starting a discussion," director Rod Hise said. "It seems like a reasonable place to start."

"I think we have enough in-

terest in something like this to initiate a discussion," Piscitelli said, "as long as we're not implying or proposing this exact framework."

"I'm not convinced that any agreement that we write are going to supersede any statutes that are already in place," Michels said.

"I see a lot of steps to take between now and when the full document [is reviewed by the board]," Salerno said, saying the document he drafted has been reviewed by the school attorney and any adjustments will be reviewed again by counsel.

LIGHT

continued from page 1

she continues. "What I wanted them to know is that we need support just like anyone else."

She says that with many types of loss, people know how to respond. How to reach out, and how to embrace those who are grieving. But that wasn't the case when their son took his own life.

"As much as people feel awkward, we were put in this position without our consent," she explains. "The avoidance and the judgement that comes after that is even more hurtful, because it just amplifies the hurt."

In the days and weeks following Ben's death, the family began trying to come to terms with life after suicide.

"When it happened, Terry and I were so desperate to make sense of something that didn't make sense," she says. "Suicide is a different beast, it's a beast all its own. It's different than other kinds of loss, because with cancer or something like that, you usually have something to blame, but with this, there is nothing."

In their grief and desperation, the Cullens found themselves driving several hours round-trip to attend support group meetings in Madison. The meetings themselves were shorter than the car ride there and back, but they played a vital role in the family's ongoing recovery.

"To walk into a room full of people who, you could see in their eyes, understood, was so important," she says.

While it was important, it wasn't always easy.

"I remember being so mad when we first got there, because they asked us to tell our names and how it happened. I thought it was none of their business," she recalls. "But then we heard all these people talking about finding their loved ones. Talking about cutting them down, or if they did it by shooting, and we started to realize these people had experienced the unimaginable, but they were still sitting here."

While the Madison group



Visit Bens-hope.com to find out more about resources for those dealing with suicide. Photo contributed.

was helpful, they wondered how many people who live in smaller towns far away from the capital were unable to attend group sessions simply because of time and distance. So, they became peer facilitators, speakers, and warriors for a cause that they know as well as anyone. They now travel the state, speaking at schools, churches and other venues, trying to both prevent future loss of life, and show those who have already lost loved ones to suicide that their lives can – and will – go on.

"We tremendously care," she says. "God put it on our hearts to do this."

"We try to tell people that suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem, and I don't think people really realize that," she says. "It's forever. You don't get a do over. This isn't like in a video game."

The Cullens have experienced things few others could imagine, and they believe that means they must now reach out to others. Sometimes they want to help those who have lost loved ones, and sometimes they want to prevent people from taking drastic actions.

In their work, they don't shy away from the difficult details.

"People don't realize how invasive it is," she says. "When [suicide] happens, there is all

this interrogation and confiscation. You are sitting there wondering where they are going with your son's things."

While speaking about it can be difficult, they say it's worth it.

"There are all these Bens in the world, going around smiling while they are hurting on the inside," she says.

BEN'S HOPE

The Cullens turned their son's first name into an acronym: Because Everybody Needs Some hope and founded an organization to help spread awareness and healing. It can be found at Bens-hope.com.

"We try to create an environment where people can come and vomit up all their yuck, and not be judged for it," she says.

Through their work, they came into contact with Mount Horeb's superintendent of schools, Steve Salerno. Salerno invited them to speak in Mount Horeb, a community stunned

scary. It's death. It's final."

Yet there the foundation of their message is laid upon a bedrock of optimism.

"We pray our efforts are having an impact," she states. "We just want people to know it's a very long, hard journey, but it's doable."

As time flows inexorably forward, the family is able to reclaim some happy memories, and even create new ones.

'WE'RE PROUD TO CALL HIM OUR SON'

The nature of his death changed his family's relationship with Benjamin Cullen. But it did not diminish it, or they love they have for him.

"We're proud to call him our son," says his mother. "He was a kind and gracious person. We watched home videos recently and looked at him with his sisters and looked at the bond they had. He always looked out for them. He'd do anything for them. He was the glue that held everything together."

"If we had to choose between nothing and 27 years, we would choose the 27 years we had with him," she continues.

As they continue visiting communities such as Mount Horeb, they say their son isn't really gone, anyway. No one who is loved is completely absent, she believes.

"They are still around," she says.

It's clearly painful to speak so openly, so publicly, and so frequently about their son's death. So why do they do it?

"We want to provide a glimmer of light," says Patti Cullen. "We're doing this to offer hope."

For those who prefer hard numbers, Ben really has saved lives. His organs and tissue were used in 194 medical procedures that helped save or better 122 lives. There are people walking around with the gift of vision, or recovering from breast cancer, whose recovery was aided by the organs, tissue, even the bones of a man they never met. Those who benefited from Ben's donations range in age from 17 to 91.

by a string of suicides.

"Dr. Salerno is an amazing man, and he came to us, and he asked us to come in order to give hope as the community moves forward," she says. "At first, we weren't there for prevention or anything like that; just hope."

This week, the Cullens returned to Mount Horeb for the third time, speaking at a local school. They know it's a difficult topic.

"It's fearful," she says. "It's

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