

# Advocate



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MOTELS4NOW**

*Youth mental  
health expands  
in St. Joe County*

***Coming Soon***

***Enhanced resources for  
suicide prevention programs***

# Anatomy of Suicide

**>> For one Goshen mom, losing a son ignited a passion for teaching youth about their minds**

**N**o one really dies from suicide. That's what Leslie Weirich believes. People die by their own hand because for a moment, even just a split second, they lose all hope.

Leslie, who recently joined Oaklawn as a suicide prevention specialist, is fighting like our kids' lives depend on it. They do. Among people age 10 to 34, suicide is the second leading cause of death.

"Every eight hours, someone takes their life in the state of Indiana. It's way too high," she says, tears welling up in her eyes. She's imagining some parent getting a knock on their door – answering it only to hear the worst possible news – and she's remembering when it happened to her.

## September 10, 2016

At 2:30 in the morning, September 10, 2016, Leslie awoke to "a pounding on my front door and a ringing at my doorbell like my house was on fire." She looked out the window to see a police car, and opened the door to an officer asking, "Do you have a son named Austin Weirich who attends Wabash College?" "Yes." "You need to call this number right away."

She ran for her cell phone and dialed. It was the



dean of the college, telling her Austin had shot himself and was being airlifted to Indianapolis. She and her husband needed to come as quickly as possible.

They drove in the middle of the night, in the worst thunder and lightning she'd ever seen. But they only got about 30 minutes down the road when her phone rang. It was the emergency room doctor, telling her Austin had died.

He was only 20.

## Austin Weirich

"My son was an overachiever," Leslie said. "He had taken weighted classes for college and high school. He graduated above a 4.0. He ran track and played football. He was a scholar athlete. He was president of his freshman, sophomore, junior and senior class."

He had his choice of colleges, and fell in love with Wabash, a small, all-male school in Crawfordsville where he played football and became a campus leader.

He had all kinds of plans for the future. Big plans for his career – he was passionate about leadership and wanted to be a speaker. Plans around campus – he was scheduled to speak about mental health just days after he died. He had small plans – plans to call his mom on Sunday, their weekly ritual. Those were his last words to Leslie, “I’ll talk to you on Sunday, Mom.”

### How does it happen?

There’s never just one thing that causes someone to take their life, Leslie says. Each situation is highly specific and reflects a combination of factors.

For Austin, “we look back now, and we realize he battled depression, but he masked it extremely well in perfectionism,” Leslie said.

“That night, when my son was in the heat of an argument, he couldn’t reason his way through that moment.”

During his freshman year of college, Austin suffered several football injuries that derailed his sports career and left him in pain. And, he had always struggled with relationships and was in a very unhealthy one at the time he died.

But for young people, there’s a biological factor at play: Their prefrontal cortex is not fully developed. It won’t be fully developed until age 27.

“Austin was 6-foot-4, 240 pounds. He looked like a grown man. But he had seven more years for his brain to be fully developed,” Leslie says. “That night, when my son was in the heat of an argument, he couldn’t reason his way through that moment. He couldn’t grab ahold of that prefrontal cortex and slow it down and see that this was just a temporary problem.”

### Where do we go from here?

In the years since Austin’s death, Leslie has devoted herself to understanding suicide and educating youth and families about its very real risk to youth from all walks of life. She speaks at schools, churches and

youth organizations, sharing her story and teaching kids about healthy coping skills, healthy relationships and that most critical component: their prefrontal cortex.

“That’s the logic, the reasoning, the higher-level thinking. So if you throw anything in on top of that – relationships or alcohol, prescription meds, Xanax – if you throw that on top of all those emotions and an immature prefrontal cortex, it’s a recipe for suicide,” Leslie said.

She’s partnering with others to get more evidence-based resources into the hands of young people and the adults in their lives. That’s where her partnership with Oaklawn is especially unique. Oaklawn’s experience in implementing best practices is long, and in some school systems where funding is an issue, the Oaklawn Foundation can help.

“If I had a magic wand to reduce suicide, it would be to implement evidence-based programs in every middle school and high school as quickly as possible,” Leslie said. “We fund band equipment, we fund a choir trip, but why aren’t we going to fund a program for our youth mental health? I don’t think it’s because we don’t care, I think it’s because we don’t realize the impact that these programs could have on the overall mental health of our youth.”

For Leslie, it’s deeply personal, but also very pragmatic.

“I don’t want any other family to go through what we went through,” she said. “It’s not about me. It’s about our kids.”

*If you’d like to partner with Oaklawn to fund Leslie’s work in our community, or to invite her to speak to your organization, contact the Oaklawn Foundation at (574) 533-1234, ext. 2066.*

## Right-now resources

- Text HOME to 741741
- Call the Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

Leslie’s favorite resource for youth:

- the “notOK” app

Youth can pick up to five people (over the age of 27!) to load to their phone. If they ever think of hurting themselves, they press the “notOK” button, which alerts their contacts the young person is in distress and delivers their location. The young person agrees not to harm themselves until help comes.

