

James Ragland: Teen help begins with CONTACT

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The gunshot wasn't fired inside a Dallas-area school.

The shell from yet another troubled teenager's gun went harmlessly into the ceiling of a middle school in Joplin, Mo., on Monday morning.

But just because it happened 370 miles away doesn't mean that Missy Wall wasn't aware.

She was. Fully.

As director of Teen CONTACT, a 24/7 crisis hotline and help center, Ms. Wall pays extraordinarily close attention to teen behavior.

"Violence is a big issue, because there's been so many of them [school shootings] now," she said.

"The media tends to chase the big story, to place the emphasis on the shooting, but that stems from so many other issues."

DallasNews.com/Extra

TeenCONTACT (Official site)

Teen CONTACT doesn't just intervene when teens find themselves in a crisis. It does that quite well, however, and has for two decades now.

"The program takes a proactive stand on school violence and other issues in schools," said Ms. Wall, who, since coming on board in March, has visited middle and high schools in Dallas, Garland, Plano and Rockwall (her alma mater).

Truth in advertising: My son, Alex, is a volunteer member of the Teen Board, which works with Teen CONTACT to raise awareness of the problems and pressures facing teens and the resources available to help them.

I'm proud of him and all the other teens for doing that.

Alex let me on to Ms. Wall, a young woman with a master of divinity degree from SMU and a master's in social work from the University of Texas at Arlington.

She's on a mission to expand the reach and impact of Teen CONTACT. "My goal is to visit every middle and high school in this area," she said.

She's not starting from scratch. Teen CONTACT was started 20 years ago, an offshoot of the nonprofit Contact Counseling and Crisis Line, which will celebrate its 40th anniversary in March. The agency fields tens of thousands of calls a year, providing crisis prevention and intervention, confidential counseling and referrals.

Ms. Wall depends on trained volunteers to help meet the growing demands of her job. She'd like to start an outreach program involving college students, and – hint, hint – that strikes me as a wonderful idea.

About a year ago, the agency started a program that's worth pointing out – The Gatekeeper.

"The Gatekeeper is one of our biggest assets," Ms. Wall said. "It is an hour presentation that talks to teens about a crisis situation, how to handle it and what happens to the body."

The program also provides information about teen depression and suicide, which remains one of the leading causes of death among 15- to 24-year-olds.

Ms. Wall makes a salient point: Before a teen threatens to harm him or herself, he or she usually begins showing signs of stress or even talking openly about it.

"The best advocate schools and teachers have concerning violence is the students," she said. "They are the pulse, and they know when things are happening or different."

Training other students to look for the warning signs is not just a smart move. It's a critical one.

"School violence, it just doesn't start with [someone saying] 'I think I'm going to blow up something.' It starts with something else," Ms. Wall said.

So wherever she goes, she tells kids the same thing: "If you hear something, let an adult know. It could save your life; it could save someone else's life."

At least four dozen school shootings have occurred worldwide since 1996, reminding us of how crucial that message is.

And don't forget what happened Monday, when a 13-year-old seventh-grader dressed in a trench coat brought an assault rifle to a Missouri middle school.

"It's sad that kids are having to deal with it," Ms. Wall said.

But how much sadder would it be if people like Ms. Wall weren't standing on the front lines helping them?

Or, more pointedly, what if they weren't working so diligently behind the scenes?

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