



Benji Project Summer Camp. Photo courtesy of The Benji Project



Benji Project Summer Camp. Photo courtesy of The Benji Project

Mental health needs of youth addressed through The Benji Project

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SPECIAL TO THE LEADER

Cynthia Osterman is certain that her son Benji is proud of the work she is doing in his name.

Osterman is the founder and board chair of The Benji Project, named for her son Benji Kenworthy who took his own life at age 15 in 2015. That tragedy prompted Osterman to create the nonprofit with the hopes of helping other teens who may be considering suicide.

"I think about him every day," she said. "He would take a lot of pride knowing that his impulse brought to life something to help others."

"He had a big heart," she continued. "Since his death, I've had kids come up to me and tell me that Benji was always there to listen and help them. This (The Benji Project) is my way to continue to love my son by loving other children."

Founded in the fall of 2017, the mission of The Benji Project is to teach proven mindfulness and self-compassion tools to young people, their families, and the community.

"We've gotten a lot bigger," she said. "We first envisioned this as something we would do after school with small groups of kids. But we are

now teaching these skills as a part of the curriculum for ninth-graders in three school districts."

The typical program includes eight weeks of classes in two hour sessions with 25 kids in each class. The nonprofit works with the Port Townsend, Chimacum, and Brinnon school districts. Founders are working to add the Quilcene schools soon.

Currently, the project has three part-time employees who have been trained to teach coping skills in the classroom and about 10 volunteers who help with office needs, fundraising, putting up flyers, and doing mailings. "Because of the confidentiality and trust with the students in our programs, we don't use volunteers in the classroom," Osterman said.

While the pandemic has somewhat subsided, COVID is still on the minds of teens, she said. Other concerns include climate change, the political atmosphere, racism and hate, and use of social media.

"Everything that happens in our country affects our youth," she said. "And these children are still dealing with the isolation they experienced because of the pandemic."

Use of social media, the

bullying and the constant comparing of oneself to others on social media, can affect teens deeply.

"Kids see these images of perfection and think they have to be like that when it's not realistic," Osterman said.

The program teaches "Mindful Self Compassion for Teens," a program developed

by a university professor with a background in medicine, and a director of youth and parenting programs in California.

The Benji Project also has week-long summer camps for interested middle school and high school students where coping skills can be practiced in social, physical, and of The

outdoor camping experiences. This past summer was the first time the project offered a summer camp for LGBTQ youth.

"It's a place where, for some, it is the first time they have been allowed to be themselves in a safe and relaxed atmosphere," she said. "It may be the first time they've settled into themselves."

Other offerings by The Benji Project include workshops for parents and teachers that show positive ways to deal with challenges with youth.

In the five years that the project has existed, it has reached 1,211 students through the school program and summer camps. That's especially important because more youth in Jefferson County have considered suicide as compared to youth across the state.

Osterman said Jefferson County is largely rural, remote, and economically disadvantaged. A lack of mental health resources shows the challenges youth face. A statewide 2018 Healthy Youth Survey showed that Jefferson County teens experienced more depression and anxiety than their peers throughout the state.

An example is that 36 percent of 10th-graders in Jefferson County said they had actually made a plan for attempting suicide, which is double the statewide average for 10th-graders.

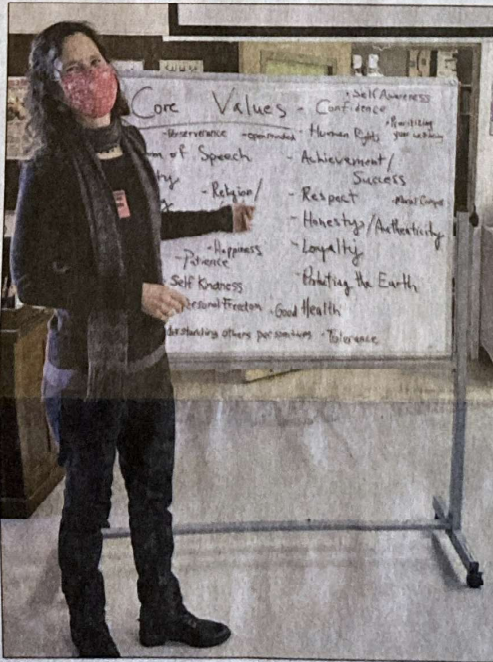
Instructors have seen situations where students did not want to participate and were withdrawn and hostile, only to see those students start to interact.

"One of them is now a leader in the program," she said. "And he reported that the skills he learned have helped him in all contacts he has."

The Benji Project has just opened an administrative office and is hoping to expand its programs. Training more instructors in the self-compassion curriculum is on the list of goals.

"Each training is about \$5,000," she said. "We started out with a budget of \$20,000 and in five years, that has grown to \$200,000. The more funding we have, we can train more instructors, and reach more teens."

Find out more at thebenjiproject.org, or call Osterman at 360-301-3487. Email cynthia@thebenjiproject.org.



Volunteer teaching about mental health. Photo courtesy of The Benji Project

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