

CALEDONIA – Jennifer Thomas remembers the silence at the initial meeting for Hope Squad at Caledonia High School.

Thomas could sense students were hesitant to sit with people they didn't know and were spread out in their own spaces.

Less than three months later, laughter has replaced the silence, as students who didn't know each other in November 2023 are now united in a common goal: to provide a support system for their peers and to work to prevent suicide.

“This week, it has been exactly what we wanted,” Thomas said. “It was really fun to see them come together, form their own group chats, form their own times, come up with their own ideas, keep each other accountable. I had never heard so many laughs and giggles.”

Today, Hope Squad's work will be highlighted as part of Hope Week at Caledonia High. The agenda includes a video from the senior, junior, sophomore and freshman class members of the club on each of the first four days. Students also will be encouraged to wear colorful or Caledonia High apparel and to perform specific tasks to show their support of Hope's Squad's mission that Together Everyone Achieves More (TEAM).

One look at the hallway outside the Caledonia High cafeteria shows how hard the 35-40 students in Hope Squad have worked to start the club. Everywhere you look, posters and positive messages of all shapes, sizes and colors adorn the

walls. The messages are designed to encourage students to help each other reduce self-destructive behavior and youth suicide by training, building and creating change in schools and communities.

Dr. Gregory A. Hudnall, a high school principal, created the first Hope Squad in 1998 at Timpview High School in Provo, Utah. In November 2023, Thomas, an academic coach / testing coordinator at Caledonia High; Angela Clark, a library media specialist who also serves as the parent coordinator and the Student Government Association sponsor at the school; and Michele Shepherd, a science teacher and Response to Intervention coordinator at the school, announced plans to create a Hope Squad at Caledonia High.

The initial steps may have been quiet, but they agreed the students have blossomed and embraced the responsibility of recognizing suicide warning signs and how to properly and respectfully report concerns to an adult.

“The whole point for me was to bring people who are not normally going to be together and bring them together and build a community,” Thomas said. “We invited all of the other clubs, and we invited the middle school and the elementary school to come to bring as many people as possible into the festivities.”

Said Clark, “The team-building skills with our students have been excellent, especially with our club members with each

other. They did a phenomenal job getting their stuff together, being organized, scheduling their own meeting times to make their grade-level videos and coming up with creative ideas. It is not just the team building. They understood it is not just team building for them, but it is for the whole school.”

Thomas, Clark and Shepherd also thanked Randy Francisco of Next Stage Media for his help producing a hype video for Hope Squad that was released Friday, Feb. 9. The video previews this week’s activities and shows off the students’ creativity.

“I think students are more apt to listen to other students, so I am really excited about the videos they have done,” Shepherd said. “My daughter is on one of the Hope Squads. She said it has been amazing to see people from different groups get to know each other and work together.”

Kathryn McKinney, a senior at Caledonia High, said she knew Hope Squad works to prevent suicides prior to being nominated to participate. She said she has enjoyed brainstorming about ideas, activities and videos and meeting and getting to know other students.

“I hope it can be an outlet for kids who are struggling to know there is someone there for them,” McKinney said. “You don’t have to go to a teacher or a counselor. You can come to one of us and we will be confidential.”

Judd Shelnut is another senior who has been nominated to join Hope Squad. He said he hadn't heard much about Hope Squad prior to last November, but he knows clubs and organizations like it are needed because suicide has impacted Caledonia and countless other schools across the country.

"This is another option for somebody, and to let people know (suicide) is not the only way out," Shelnut said. "There are people here who can help you go through your struggles and fight your demons."

Shelnut said Hope Squad members can provide a helpful step up on a bad day or be there to listen to help someone from bottling everything up and not seeing an alternative. He said Hope Squad members received instruction on how to talk to other students and not be judgmental. Shelnut said learning to be more aware of situations showed him and the others how they can be a "wall to grab on to" so they can impact the school in a positive way.

"I hope this will be one of the biggest clubs and one of the most active clubs in the school," Shelnut said. "I hope we can expand and maybe get one in the middle school and even the elementary school, if it comes down to it."

"Everybody needs somebody to talk to. It is not just a high school thing or a middle school thing. It's something everybody needs."

There are close to 2,000 Hope Squads in classrooms across the United States and Canada, but only a few in the state of Mississippi, including one at Pass Christian High.

For more information about Hope Squad, go to:  
<https://hopesquad.com/>.