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TOP STORY

Bozeman High Hawks spread peace, compassion

JODI HAUSEN, Chronicle Staff Writer Dec 21, 2012



Luminarias by Bozeman High School students, with messages to the victims and families of the Sandy Hook tragedy last week, begin to glow outside the Gallatin County Courthouse in Bozeman, Friday, Dec. 21.

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Adrian Sanchez-Gonzalez/Chronicle

Bozeman High School students have decided to share some light after the darkness of the Newtown, Conn., school massacre.

Members of the school's leadership club, student council and Hawk Tawk school newspaper lit hundreds of luminarias in front of the Gallatin County Courthouse on Friday evening. They spent the week encouraging students from the high school and Sacajawea Middle School to write messages of hope and caring on white bags that glowed warm with candlelight in the cold evening air.

There are no simple answers to the students' questions. Why did Adam Lanza kill his mother, go to Sandy Hook Elementary School, kill 26 people and then himself? Why did so many little children die?

But the students wanted to do something.

"We are reaching out because we knew a lot of students were upset," said Grace May, Bozeman High student body vice president. "We wanted to do something to show that we are a compassionate student body."

So May sent out a text message earlier this week asking students to contribute their thoughts to the process and the text went viral.

"Kids were talking about it on Twitter and Facebook," May said. "I got (the text) sent back to me about 10 times. I think people responded because there wasn't a lot of discussion" coming from the administration.

Georgia Haniuk, Hawk Tawk editor, said students want to help.

"When we don't address something like this, it becomes harder because we all have questions," she said.

Students were worried, especially after a suspicious person loitering near the school a few days before the Newtown shooting prompted a brief lockdown at the high school, said Jackson Toth, a member of the leadership group.

"What really made me want to do this was the lockdown and then Friday, this happened," he said.

Initially, students planned to send the luminarias to Newtown, but they learned the town was overrun with support. So the students decided to light them here to show their support, not only for Newtown, but for their own community.

“We thought if we could recognize it here, in our own town, we’d still be doing what we set out to do,” Haniuk said.

Judging by the messages written by hundreds of students, it appears they succeeded.

“Bozeman loves, thinks of, cherishes and weeps with Newtown,” one bag read.

“You’re never alone; we’re here together to love, to care, to support and to stand by each other through even the worst occasions,” another said.

“They’re heartbreaking and they’re beautiful,” Haniuk said.

Guidance counselor Dianne Corneer was clearly impressed with the students’ effort.

“I think this is incredible because it was driven by students,” she said. “We are really proud of you guys.”

Hawk Tawk teacher Hilary Klug, who is from a town near Newtown, said she was touched by the students’ actions.

“It’s moving to me to see that our students are such good leaders and are setting such a good example for the student body,” she said. “I’m so proud. I am moved to tears anytime one of my friends asks me what’s happening with the luminaria project.”

Students said more understanding and acceptance in the community might prevent a similar event from happening here. The luminaria project is a symbol of that hope.

“It is truly a token of compassion, of love and support that high school students aren’t always given credit for,” May said. “We have a job, too, as students to reach out and be kind.”

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