Students with disabilities program hires director

By Jayce Carral

WSU ROAR (Responsibility Opportunities Advocacy Respect) has recruited a new director for the program.

WSU ROAR is a post-secondary education program designed for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). It is a two-year degree seeking program which guides students to graduate with career goals and encourages them to live independently, said Brenda Barrio, WSU ROAR co-founder.

WSU ROAR students attend audited courses, engage in social activities and workshops on various topics, Barrio said. The courses are classes that do not result in credits.

Falash said some of the work-shops WSU ROAR students attend include teaching communication, human sexuality and mental health, helping students obtain internships in the workplace of their field of interest is also an important part of the program.

“We are providing experiences that push the students’ boundaries,” Barrio said. “They’re not only capable of doing what everyone else can do, but they’re also succeeding in doing so.”

She said it is difficult for students with I/DD to enroll into a university. It is common for the students to apply to an I/DD education in their pre-secondary schooling, so the students do not have much experience with universities, she said. Those requirements made four years of English or math.

Universities also require scores from standardized tests like SAT and ACT, which may be difficult for I/DD students to complete, said Tom Falash, WSU ROAR’s new director.

Falash said he was a special education teacher in pre-secondary public schools. He has two sons who were in special education programs during high school, and his new position allows him to apply the skills he learned working with I/DD students, he said.

“Ve seen them struggle and overcome and become stronger human beings,” Falash said.

Falash said the program opened his eyes to the way a student-athlete mental health over the past year has been incredible.

Brian Cooper, Ray Littles and Tierney Hillinski were all members of the SAAC mental health committee who helped lead the trainings.

Cooper, SAAC president and junior track and field athlete, said the program opened his eyes and helped start a conversation about student-athlete mental health at WSU.

He said athletes face challenges most people do not because of the pressure to act, which can be overwhelming.

“Being in a space where it’s safe,” Cooper said, “where you’re encouraged to be authentic, honest and vulnerable is unique, and something that hasn’t been here before.”

Littles, SAAC member and senior track and field athlete, said in the past mental health trainings have occurred in reaction to a tragedy, but this time they were proactive.

“These trainings did a good job of addressing the fact that you need to check yourself every day and just see how you’re feeling,” he said.

Sillman, who is also a SAAC member and redshirt junior track and field athlete, said the program gives athletes tools to cope with mental health issues, which they could translate into living better lives.

Sillman said she went into the trainings with the belief she had it figured out and then learned how to open up about her own struggles.

She said the progress Hillinski’s Hope has made bringing awareness to student-athlete mental health over the past year has been incredible.

“Even though it was born from something horrific,” Sillman said, “the passion that the family has for the mental health and getting their message out there really has been a blessing for the university.”

Cooper never met Tyler, but he remembers seeing him while standing in line at Panda Express the morning after the quarterback led WSU to a comeback victory over Boise State. Cooper said Tyler smiled and made his day.

“I think as tragic as Tyler’s passing was, how drastically it started the conversation and opened the conversation to talk about mental health has been profound,” he said.

The program has also been brought to Eastern Washington University and University of Idaho. The goal is to eventually be at schools around the country.

Mark said currently they are in a position of collecting data and providing the training as they try to study the effectiveness of the program over a longer period of time.

Hillinski’s Hope is currently in contact with several universities across Michigan, Boise State University and South Carolina University about potentially bringing the program to them.

Mark said Hillinski’s Hope can step in as a funding mechanism for schools that don’t have the resources or budget to implement the program on their own.

Eventually, Mark hopes universities will invest in the trainings so it becomes a part of their budget. He said mental health is a complex problem where people have a hard time speaking up. Tyler could tell me anything,” Mark said, “but I couldn’t tell him he was sick, couldn’t tell him he was going to steal a gun and end his life.”

The goal of Hillinski’s Hope is not to prevent suicides, but improve and address the mental health issues in a student-athlete’s life, Mark said.

“We know by doing that,” he said, “we have saved dozens of lives. If we’ve done something, but because we’ve continued to talk about it.”

The Hilinski’s are currently in the process of creating a scholarship at WSU at Tyler’s name. It will be called the Tyler Hilinski Memorial Scholarship and will be officially established soon, said Trevor Durham, associate vice president at the WSU Foundation, in an email.

The scholarship is expected to be worth $1,000 and will be awarded in Fall 2019, Durham wrote.

The criteria for qualifying for the scholarship has yet to be finalized, Durham wrote. But the scholarship will go to a student-athlete who maintains a 3.0 or above GPA.

Donors have given $1,777,120 to the university in Tyler’s name as of Dec. 31, 2018, Durham wrote.

Mark said they receive calls, emails and texts each day thanking them for sharing Tyler’s story and destigmatizing mental illness.

Both Mark and Kym hear stories frequently from people who faced similar situations, which has helped them get through the loss of their son.

Mark said they are glad they have been able to bring attention to student-athlete mental health while continuing to honor Tyler.

“I feel positive that we’re going in the right direction,” he said. “It’s an awful long road to make a lot of progress.”

Mark and Kym said they talk about Tyler all the time and it still helps them to express what they remember most about him.

“I think what I miss is just looking at that sweet smile, hearing his voice say ‘Hey Mama’ and just being with him,” Kym said. “He’s my baby, and I just loved being with that kid.”

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