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Montclair State to administer program to help NJ kids develop coping, social skills

As a child, Todd Ouida suffered panic attacks and was unable to go to school for two-and-a-half years.

His parents tried medication and psycho-therapy, which worked. Ouida went on to attend the University of Michigan and eventually work at Cantor Fitzgerald.

Then on Sept. 11 he was killed in the attacks on the World Trade Center.

"He was on the 105th floor. I was on the 77th floor. I escaped. He didn't," said his father, Herb Ouida, of River Edge.

In their son's honor, the Ouidas started the Todd Ouida Children's Foundation, which financially supports psychological services and other mental health initiatives for children of families in need.

The foundation also raises awareness and works to reduce the stigma of anxiety and depression disorders in children.

In their latest effort, the foundation teamed up with Novartis and Montclair State University (MSU) to offer teachers training in Zippy's Friends, a school program developed in the United Kingdom, which has developed mental health services for kindergarten and first grade students.

Ouida said the program teaches children they can express themselves in a safe environment rather than internalize their feelings.

"We're looking to offer it to schools and our hope is that once teachers are trained, it will be known more and more throughout the state," Ouida said. "Our goal is to have it offered in every school in New Jersey."

Dr. Gerard Costa, director for MSU's center for autism and early childhood mental health, emphasized the importance of addressing children's feelings - especially now.

"In the face of the devastation of super storm Sandy and the Sandy Hook Elementary School tragedy, our youngest children must find ways to share their thoughts and feelings about such traumatic events," he said in a statement. "It is imperative that we address the mental and emotional well-being of young children."

A 10,000 grant from the Todd Ouida Children's Foundation, and a matching grant from Novartis Pharmaceuticals, will make the special training in using Zippy's curriculum available to 30 additional kindergarten and first grade teachers from several New Jersey school districts, Costa said.

Ouida urged schools to act quickly to participate in the program.

"They need to do it very soon," he said. "The spots are filling up and the training is going to be offered in mid-January."

It will be of interest to Passaic Valley towns in his view.

"Schools in Totowa and the other towns, I think they would be interested in knowing about the program and possibly interested in taking advantage of the scholarship," Ouida said.

He referred to the tragedy in Newtown, Conn. as it relates to the Zippy's mental health program.

"Mental health is trying to prevent that behavior and the earlier you intervene - the earlier you identify coping skills - the less likely you are to suffer later in life," Ouida said.

The program is already being offered in 12 elementary schools in Wayne, Paterson, River Edge and Paramus, according to the statement. Those districts will serve as models for replicating the curriculum statewide and eventually nationwide, according to Costa.

"Kindergarten and first grade are both vulnerable and formative years for young children," he said. "As they are learning reading, writing, math and science, it's crucial that we teach them how to cope with issues, such as friendship, feeling lonely, bullying, loss, transition to school and facing new experiences."

For more information about the Zippy's Friends program at MSU contact Costa at 973-655-6685 or caecmh@montclair.edu.

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