

## GRYMES HILL



Participants register for Alpha Phi Omega's suicide awareness walk at Wagner College on Grymes Hill on Sunday. *Annalise Knudson, Staten Island Advance*

## Suicide awareness walk held at Wagner

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A Wagner College co-ed fraternity wants the community to know they aren't alone in their battles of suicide and mental illnesses.

Alpha Phi Omega hosted its suicide awareness walk, "Story Unfinished," on the grounds of the Grymes Hill campus on Sunday.

Students walked around the oval for the 5K walk after listening to a panel of guest speakers from the National Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI), loss survivors and psychologists.

During the panel, NAMI representatives Kristy Hommel and Mitzi Bockmann shared their personal experiences of living with a mental illness and feelings of suicide.

"Nobody wants to talk

about mental illness until you bring it up," Bockmann said.

Panelists answered questions such as knowing the warning signs or behaviors of those who are thinking about suicide, how to ask someone if they are thinking about suicide, and tips for being there for those who are suicidal.

Kathleen Thieme, a senior at Wagner College, president of Alpha Phi Omega and co-organizer of the event, said the walk coincides with their co-ed fraternity's national service week.

"It's such a personal thing for me; I really wanted to do something like this on campus," said Thieme, who lost a family member to suicide. "I think it's really important to stop the stigma about suicide and mental health in

general."

"So many people won't seek help because there is a shame that people feel about it, and I think that if you're open about it, you can actually have a conversation that can [be beneficial]," Thieme said.

Panelist and loss survivor Matt Sefcik, a junior at Wagner, noted that college students have a higher risk of being diagnosed with a mental illness.

"It's scary, but it also shows how not alone they are," Sefcik said. "I don't think we are doing enough to let people know they are not alone. The most important thing is to take that step to initiate the conversation. Take that first step, and it'll be amazing what comes from it."

The event included dance performances and

a vigil led by Wagner chaplain, Rev. Martin Malzahn. Jiannettos Pizza truck and the Lickety Split ice cream truck sold food at the event. Tables with information and resources were available to participants.

Since 2004, there have been at least 20 suicide deaths in the borough each year, according to data from the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH).

There were 31 suicide-related deaths — or 5.9 per 100,000 residents — in 2015, the last year that data is available, a DOHMH spokeswoman told the Advance last year.

The Advance has been documenting the care of Staten Island's mentally ill in a series of stories. Click here for additional stories in the project.