



Holyn, John, Tommy, Susie and Michael Trautwein

DELIVERING HOPE

BY CINDY LOMBARDO

The phrase “Will To Live” carries a special meaning in the hearts of the Trautwein family of Johns Creek. Fifteen-year-old Will Trautwein took his life in October 2010. His family, with love and support for each other and from extended family, friends and the community, built the Will To Live Foundation (WTLF), a non-profit organization in his memory. The Foundation spreads awareness about teen suicide, funds education programs for suicide prevention and delivers hope.

John Trautwein, Will’s father, said that he and his wife, Susie, created a fund thinking they could use it for scholarships in Will’s honor. “We had a huge outpouring of love and support from the community and especially from Will’s friends and friends of his siblings. I was impressed by the power of how these kids were inspiring my own kids and carrying them through this dark hour by delivering love and hope,” John said. That inspiration became the WTLF’s goal to provide a focus on getting kids to support and recognize hope in each other. The Foundation has grown well beyond that initial goal since it was formed in November 2010 during a meeting with John and Susie,

Will’s brothers, Tommy and Michael, his sister, Holyn, and Will’s friends.

The Trautwein family created the Will To Live Foundation to spread awareness by teaching kids to recognize the love and hope they have in each other and to confide in each other. John said, “Will never spoke to anyone about his struggles. It can be difficult for teens to speak to adults, but I hoped to get teens to talk to each other. I knew nothing about teen suicide and learned that one in six teens have some sort of depression.” John speaks to various audiences including sports teams, youth groups, high schools, colleges, and scouting groups to raise awareness of teen suicide. The awareness enables people to talk about it. “Life is hard for kids, and my eyes were opened to how different teenagers’ lives are today from when I was a kid. Social media never gives kids privacy or downtime. They deal with growing up too fast, pressures of excelling in school and sports, and attending good colleges,” John said. The WTLF centers on caring for hearts and teaching friends that they can help each other. “The national teen suicide rate has increased, and we need to talk about it more. We

are reaching out to the entire family to communicate more to parents in challenging their kids' fate and learning to listen," John said. People are listening to a father who misses his son and explaining what he has learned. The Foundation addresses the stigma about depression that makes it difficult for kids and adults to recognize and acknowledge signs for help.

The Will To Live Foundation spreads awareness about teen suicide through media, pamphlets, online information websites and educational programs. Through fundraisers and financial supporters, the organization has funded the Signs of Suicide program in over 2,000 high schools and middle schools across the country, including every public school in Fulton County. The WTLF has also funded private counseling on site at high schools in north Fulton. In the first year after Will's death, his friends at Northview High School formed a Will To Live Club that has spread into other schools, and Will's siblings remain involved. Michael leads the club at Northview. Tommy formed a club at UGA, and Holyn leads the club at River Trail Middle School. These clubs give kids a place to talk, and members raise funds to help other kids. Last year, Northview raised \$8,000 to donate to Make-A-Wish Foundation.

Through fundraisers and activities, the WTLF delivers hope. Since it began, the Foundation has provided over 100 Life Teammates Scholarships to students at Northview, as well as other local schools. Recipients, chosen by peers, are selected for showing leadership and care toward teammates and peers. The 8th annual Fun Run for Hope in early February drew great support from the community and raised funds for programs. Since Will played guitar and was in a band, his love for music inspired the fundraiser Willstock. This event is held every September at Northview High School. Teenage and young adult bands play and promote love and hope through music. The September 2017 Willstock event raised \$43,000.

Since 2010, the message of the Will To Live Foundation has reached thousands and raised over a million dollars. Spreading awareness and talking about depression in a safe zone, where others understand challenges, offers hope and encouragement to teens. The goal to improve lives and provide a will to live is a positive mission to build relationships and reduce suicide. "With the power of delivering hope to improve each others' lives, I am honoring my son," John said.

For more information, visit: will-to-live.org.



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