

‘No more bullying’

Peabody demands change at teen’s vigil

By Caroline Enos

» Staff Writer

PEABODY — Fifteen-year-old Arianna Rizzotti stood on the outside ring of more than 100 people holding lit candles on Veterans Memorial Drive Friday, May 23.

The home before her belonged to Jason Bernard, a 14-year-old eighth-grader at Higgins Middle School who, just one week before, died by suicide because of bullying.

“This took my best friend,” she said.

Rizzotti met Jason 3½ years ago. She loved his sense of humor, and said he loved to run track and bake.

“He was a really energetic person,” Rizzotti said. “He would always tell me, ‘just keep it pushing.’”

Jason’s sudden death was a shock, said another friend, Jonyx Castillo, 14.

“Hearing this and seeing this happen, it just really hurts because he was never the type of person to let anybody bully him or bring him down,” Castillo said. “So for him to commit suicide because he was being bullied, it really says a lot — that bullying is a bigger battle.”

Friday night’s vigil was a

way to remember Jason, but also a call to action by his family.

Small flags with his face and messages against bullying were hung around their yard. His parents, Juana Bencosme and William Bernard, wore black sweatshirts with the neon green writing: “Stop Bullying. Stand Up. Speak Out.”

“We just want this to end,” his father said from the family’s front porch. “We want there to be no more bullying.”

Jason’s older sister, Cely Rosario, led the crowd of mostly middle and high school students in chants of “No more bullying,” “Together we are stronger” and “Justice for Jason.”

“Jason’s parents will have a hole in their heart for the rest of their lives,” she said. “So it is up to all of us here to make sure that another teen or another human being doesn’t feel as alone as Jason felt.”

She held a moment of silence for her brother and led those gathered in releasing dozens of balloons into the sky. She also demanded politicians and school administrators do more to address bullying.

“Pick up the phone,” Rosario told the crowd. “Call the



JARED CHARNEY/Photos

Cely Rosario receives a hug during a candlelight vigil for her 14-year-old brother Jason Bernard outside of their family’s home in Peabody on Friday, May 23. The vigil was held one week after Jason committed suicide over bullying he faced at the Higgins Middle School.



Ricky Chao, whose daughter was friends with Jason Bernard, sheds tears during a vigil held for the teen one week after he committed suicide over bullying he faced at the Higgins Middle School. The vigil was held at Jason’s home in Peabody.

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EDITORIAL

Why the free press must remain free

Four billion people read Associated Press journalism daily.

A billion access Reuters content each day.

Bloomberg Media has 60 million video viewers monthly.

Yet the Trump administration is drastically curtailing these three major wire services' access to White House press conferences.

For generations, a spot in the press pool at White House media events was reserved for wire services. The Trump administration recently announced it was adding a second spot for a print journalist to pool, but the long-time reserved position will no longer be guaranteed a seat at each press conference.

The wire services can still apply to fill one of the designated seats.

The result is that newspapers, broadcasters and other media outlets across the world that depend on wire services for national and international news will no longer have secured access to coverage of White House press events. The AP alone serves more than 15,000 media outlets around the country including The Salem News and the Gloucester Daily Times.

The Trump administration is choking off the ability of an independent press to ask questions and report on White House press conferences while simultaneously shutting down the flow of reporting from the White House to communities across the country served by news organizations that use the wire services.

For decades, the White House Correspondents' Association has been in charge of setting the rules for the press pool, an important task given that many of the press conferences are conducted in small spaces that can't accommodate more than a few dozen journalists.

But the Trump administration in February wrested control



MAXX-STUDIO/ 3d illustration

over the press pool from the correspondents' association, announcing that it would allot fewer spaces to legacy news organizations in favor of new media, including social media influencers. The decision, without a doubt, was driven by Trump's desire to reduce access for organizations that critically report news about him.

That same month, the administration revoked AP access to White House pressers after Trump issued an executive order to change the name of the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of America and the AP declined to adhere to the change in its reporting and in its stylebook, because AP is an international wire service and throughout the world the gulf is still called Gulf of Mexico.

The AP sued, and U.S. District Judge Trevor McFadden ruled that the White House could not deny AP access on the basis of its decision to continue using "Gulf of Mexico." McFadden ordered the Trump administration to restore the AP's White House press pool access.

Clearly, the administration's recent decision to remove the press pool seat for AP, Reuters

and Bloomberg is a ploy to continue curtailing AP access, and by extension, that of thousands of news outlets relying on these services.

Previous presidents have recognized the importance of White House coverage by independent media to ensure transparency and the free flow of information. The Trump administration's battle with the AP and restriction of wire service access are unmistakable signs that it does not. The U.S. Constitution prohibits infringing on a free press with the understanding that a free, independent and unfettered press is crucial for democracy.

Instead, the president wants to control not only terminology used by media outlets, but also their ability to provide news to millions of Americans through community newspapers and other local media across the country.

Without a free press, we are all less free.

This piece originated with The Herald Bulletin in Anderson, Indiana, a sister CNHI newspaper to The Salem News and The Gloucester Daily Times.



REAL NEWS IN SCHOOLS

How the program works

Your school can have access to local, trusted journalism from The Salem News and Gloucester Daily Times on a daily basis. We report on news throughout the North Shore and Cape Ann, covering all things local — from schools, to sports, to government, people profiles, business, entertainment and more. You get the facts — the real news — from experienced reporters, photographers and editors you can count on at no cost to your school.

Here are the basics of the program:

What is it? The Salem News and Gloucester Daily Times partner with local businesses to provide free digital access to our newspapers to anyone within a school in our coverage area at no cost to the school. This access encourages students to value the vital news coverage being produced by The Salem News and Gloucester Daily Times. They will build awareness and gain critical thinking skills in the process.

Who can participate? This program will benefit teachers, students, and others in the school community.

Where does it take place? You can access our newspaper online. Teachers can incorporate the program into their curriculums, even having reporters, photographers and editors visit your class.

When can we start benefiting? As soon as we have your commitment to participate in Real News in Schools we will go to work to find a local business who wants to sponsor you. Once we have one, we will work with your IT Department to get the program up and running.

Why is this valuable? There's a lot of fake news out there on social media and elsewhere. The Salem News, founded in 1880 as The Salem Evening News, and the Gloucester Daily Times, founded in 1888, both award-winning publications, have long track records of fair and accurate reporting that cuts through the misinformation.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:
SALEMNEWS.COM/REALNEWS
GLOUCESTERTIMES.COM/REALNEWS

Mental health center to open after teen's suicide

By Caroline Enos

» Staff Writer

PEABODY — The city will create a new mental health center at the Higgins Middle School that will open in September, Mayor Ted Bettencourt announced on May 27.

The center will be operated under the city's Health and Social Services division in partnership with the school district and a community

health provider that the city will choose in the coming months, he told The Salem News.

The center will be staffed by two full-time counselors or therapists who will also be hired ahead of the first day of school. Costs associated with those salaries and running the center will be mostly covered by state grant funding and money from the city's settlement with major pharmaceutical companies for their

role in the opioid crisis, Bettencourt said.

This will not affect the school district's budget for fiscal 2026 and will not have a large impact on the city's overall budget, he said.

This new addition comes after 14-year-old eighth grader Jason Bernard died by suicide on May 17 after facing bullying at the middle school.

His family continues to call for stricter anti-bullying measures at

the local and state level in light of his death.

"This mental health center is not the end or final product of our response to this devastating tragedy," Bettencourt said. "This is part of a plan we're working on, and this is not going to be resolved in a week or in one meeting. It's a continual work in progress as we examine our services and provide support for our community."

The city will also host a community-wide meeting and workshops on responding to mental health crises in response to the tragedy. A date has not yet been announced because officials are still planning that gathering, he said.

"There will be a lot of work ahead of us. I anticipate a number of meetings will be set up as we provide support for our teachers, parents and students."



JARED CHARNEY/Photos

A candlelight vigil for Jason Bernard was held outside his family's home in Peabody on Friday, May 23, one week after the 14 year old committed suicide after facing bullying at Higgins Middle School.

» Vigil

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mayor's office, the School Committee, our legislators. We need to change. We need to change what's happening in our community. We cannot let another child go."

A petition started by local parents calling for stronger anti-bullying legislation had garnered nearly 6,000 signatures as of that Friday. Mayor Ted Bettencourt announced earlier in the week that a community discussion would be held as a result of Jason's death. A date has not yet been set.

Uvalde Foundation for Kids, a national nonprofit for student advocacy and violence

prevention, has launched an independent review of bullying and student mental health care at Peabody Public Schools after Jason's teacher and other parents lodged complaints with the organization.

Local parents were among those holding candles on Jason's lawn on May 23. Even ones who didn't know him or his family.

"My daughter has also been bullied at the (Higgins) and the school didn't really do much about it," Tracy Stafford said. "I wanted to be here for the family, to support them."

A table with prayer candles, many donning images of Jason, sat on the lawn under a tent to protect them from Friday's rain. Ricky Chao encouraged mourners to light a candle in memory of Jason, his daughter's friend.

"Kids need to stop being followers and start being leaders," Chao said. "If you see something, you need to stand up."

Inside the family's home, bouquets of flowers lined every table and Bernard smiled down from large photos taken of him throughout his life, including one where he was dressed as Harry Potter.

Certificates he earned for graduating from elementary school and academic excellence at the Higgins Middle School sat on a leather chair. Around them, members of his large family crowded together in the living room.

"Every day, I see in the news or hear things about bullying," Jason's cousin Fiordaliza Bernard said. "It's everywhere. They need to stop it."



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Police motorcycle unit visits schools

By Ethan Forman

» Staff Writer

Members of the Northeastern Massachusetts Law Enforcement Council Motors Unit thundered into Cape Ann recently for a blessing and to visit two elementary schools.

Gloucester police Officer Joe Parady, the only member of the NEMLEC Motors Unit from the Gloucester Police Department, pulled together the May 30 ride to America's oldest seaport and Rockport.

The 20 motorcycles carrying officers from communities across Northeastern Massachusetts roared over to East Veterans Elementary School on Webster Street where they were greeted by kindergartners and first-graders.

The bikes pulled around the school's circular driveway and lined up their bikes. The students then crowded around their bikes and got stickers from the officers.

"They are definitely not shy in any way," Parady said.

Parady said it was important for schoolchildren to learn about what police do so they can feel comfortable approaching officers in case of an emergency.

"Good," said first-grader Milosc Cimoszko, 6, about the motorcycle unit. He said he had never seen a police motorcycle before. "Cool" he said about the police motorcycle crew.

The unit, a specialized team skilled in using motorcycles for traffic enforcement, event security and rapid response operations, then rode off for a ride around the Back Shore and a final destination at Rockport Elementary School on Jerden's Lane where they fielded questions from students.

Police officers taking part in the ride were from Gloucester, Natick, Amesbury, Salem, Tewksbury, Haverhill, Littleton, Weston, Melrose, Swampscott, Sudbury, Somerville, Waltham, Arlington and Winchester.

Before visiting the schools, members of the unit visited Gloucester for a "blessing of the bikes."

At St. Ann Church, the Rev. James "Father Jim" Achadinha stood out on Pleasant Street and gave a short service, sprinkled their bikes with holy water, and blessed each individual motorcycle officer.

"I think this is the first blessing of the bikes we've had as a unit," Parady said.

He noted that being a police officer is a dangerous job and motorcycles can be dangerous, which is why the unit trains monthly.

"We can all use a blessing to keep us safe," he said.



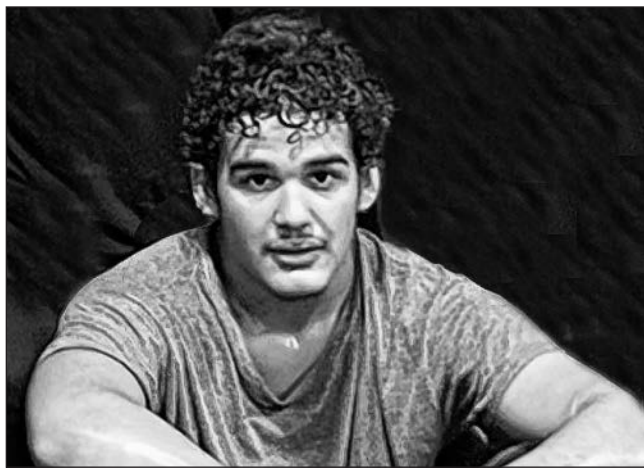
DAVID SOKOL/Staff photos

Preschool student Madison Medeiros, 5, turns on the lights on the police motorcycle of Littleton police Officer Ryan Richard when members of the NEMLEC Motor Unit visited Rockport Elementary School on May 30.

Gloucester Police Officer Joseph Parady hands out stickers to students at Rockport Elementary School when members of the NEMLEC Motor Unit visited May 30.



Kindergartner Estefany Merida gives a hug to Littleton Police Officer Ryan Richard when members of the NEMLEC Motor Unit visited the East Veterans Elementary School in Gloucester on May 30.



Freddy Espinal

WAYNE MODA/Courtesy photo

In memory of Freddy

Student heart screenings honor late Peabody High senior

By Caroline Enos

» Staff Writer

PEABODY — A high school senior held a student heart screening event at Peabody Veterans Memorial High School May 19 in memory of a her friend and fellow classmate Freddy Espinal, who died from sudden cardiac arrest last year.

Espinal, 17, collapsed while at a wrestling practice in September. The PVMHS junior

was a member of the school's wrestling team and wrestling club RRWC in North Reading. He was also a former football player at the high school and in the city's youth league.

Called "ECGs for Espinal," the event saw about 65 students undergo low-cost electrocardiogram (ECG) screenings for heart health, with members of the school's Medical Assisting program helping to conduct these screenings.

The event was organized by 18-year-old Addison Merrill, who met Espinal when she was a freshman but grew closer to him when she

became the wrestling team's manager.

"He was the sweetest kid. He was a friend to everyone," Merrill said. "He was like a little brother to me, and he was always so protective of his friends. He was just a presence that everybody wanted in the room."

Merrill is also a captain of the PVMHS volleyball team. Another young athlete died the same way Espinal did at a volleyball tournament Merrill attended in February, she said.

"Ever since Freddy's death, I've noticed how many people, especially young kids, have been affected by sudden

cardiac arrest and have gone into cardiac arrest during sports games or just at school," she said.

"I know that if he was here, he'd definitely want to do something like this if it was a friend that he lost."

Merrill partnered with the national nonprofit Who We Play For to organize the screenings after her aunt, a school principal, introduced her to Emily Knight, a registered nurse with the nonprofit.

Who We Play For conducts heart screenings across the country, particularly for young athletes. Sudden

cardiac arrest is the number one cause of death in American schools, and about one in 300 youth have a detectable, potentially life-threatening condition that could lead to sudden cardiac arrest, according to the organization.

"We are incredibly proud of Addison and all the students involved in this initiative," Knight and other organizers said in a statement. "ECGs for Espinal" is more than a program — it's a legacy of love, advocacy, and student-driven change. It speaks to the kind of community PVMHS is, and the kind of community Freddy helped build."

Peabody Veterans Memorial High School students took part in a heart health screening event organized by senior Addison Merrill and the nonprofit Who We Play For in honor of Freddy Espinal, a PVMHS junior who died from sudden cardiac arrest while at wrestling practice last year.

COURTESY PHOTO



The screenings are sent to a cardiologist to be examined before students receive their results from the ECGs, Merrill said. They will be notified if their results show signs of having a high risk for heart issues or heart defects, or are otherwise irregular.

Merrill hopes to host more heart screenings for Peabody students in the future, whether that be at a local YMCA or a yearly screening event at the high school, she said.

"There's so many kids that are affected by sudden cardiac arrest, and I just think it should really start being brought to light."

\$550K roof planned for Rockport High

By Stephen Hagan

» Staff Writer

ROCKPORT — Town and school officials are working to replace the roof on the Rockport Middle and High School building on Jerden's Lane.

April's Town Meeting approved the borrowing of \$550,000 to finance the repair and replacement of the roof, including all incidental and related expenses.

"It will cover portions of the roof over the Middle and High School building," Town Administrator Mitch Vieira said of the money. "The current roof in those areas is compromised and leaks severely during rain events. After many attempts to patch it, this project will result in repairs and replacement of the impacted areas."

In addition, Senate Minority Leader Bruce Tarr,

R-Gloucester, has placed a local earmark in the fiscal 2025 Supplemental State Budget bill (S. 2512) that would provide \$200,000 toward this project.

"If this earmark makes it through the Conference Committee and the governor, it will reduce the amount of borrowing that the town will need to undertake," Vieira said.

The Department of Public Works is partnering with

Rockport Public Schools to manage the project.

"The project is out to bid and it is anticipated that work will take place during the summer," he said.

In the bid announcement, the work to be done includes efforts to "recover" the gymnasium roof (Roof A) with a "single-ply membrane" and restore the foyer and cafeteria roof (Roof B). The bid also calls for replacing the

canopy roof (Roof C) and the hallway roof (Roof D) with new code-complaint insulation, and repairing, repointing and coating the existing masonry wall and chimney, in accordance with the project plans and specifications. Repairs are to be made to the rooves' wood roof planks, gypsum planks, curbs and flashings.

According to a legal notice published in the

Gloucester Daily Times, electronic bids for the roof project were due Wednesday and will be opened at Town Hall on Friday, June 13, at 10 a.m.

"The town will issue (the) award to the responsible and eligible contractor that offers the lowest price," reads the public notice.

Stephen Hagan may be contacted at 978-675-2708, or shagan@gloucesterimes.com.

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