

# Speaker Paul Wesselmann says kindness, empathy keys to dealing with troubled teens



Written by

**Michael Louis Vinson**

5:44 AM, May. 17, 2011|

APPLETON — As he led an Appleton **Public Library** audience of about 125 teens, parents and educators in a workshop on connecting with youth in crisis, Paul Wesselmann almost never stopped smiling.

Even while retelling stories punctuated by loneliness and despair, Wesselmann crackled with a lightness that resonated with his central message: hope.

"Life is hard," he said. "And we get better."

Sponsored by the city of Appleton, Lawrence **University** and the J. J. Keller Foundation, Wesselmann's presentation Monday was part of a broader community response to the half dozen youth suicides that have occurred in the Fox Valley since 2009.

Even as Wesselmann conceded that "some

of you came here tonight wondering, maybe hoping, that you could learn the secret of how to identify a kid that is in deep trouble and to go up them and say the right thing and save their life," he stressed that hope and help often arrive in "small deposits" of empathy and kindness.

"My goal (is) for people to leave here ready and committed to spend more time not just with their kids, not just their friends, not just the students in their **classrooms** ... but the kid who bags your groceries or the weird kid that lives down the street that no one really talks to," he said. "I'm hoping you're wondering what deposits you might be able to make. You do not have to figure out which kid you encounter is in significant pain because we all need deposits."

Darla Barker of Shiocton, whose son Cody, 17, took his life in September, said she wished Wesselmann, who lives in Madison, could share his message with every teen in the Fox Valley.

"The part where he says someone may not

Advertisement

Do you know what sparks Sam?



WATCH THE VIDEO

THE POST-CRESCENT  
postcrescent.com

in partnership with  
**YAHOO!**

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

look like they need help, they may not look like they have something to say — I'll try to go out of my way more often to find that person," Barker said.

Though it was the third time Jerimiah Buege, 19, of New [London](#), had heard Wesselmann speak, Buege was inspired anew.

"What I usually take away from it is that no matter how hard days seem, it gets [better](#)," Buege said. "That's always the message I say. Keep fighting, keep trying. There are people out there that love you that you don't even know."

In closing, Wesselmann encouraged the audience to always bring their "best, full self" to work, school and family life, and to use that [energy](#) to spread hope to others.

"To everyone in this room who wants to connect with youth in crisis, keep your eyes and your hearts open for opportunities to reach out and lift up," Wesselmann said.

"Acts as simple as a warm smile, direct eye contact and brief conversations are sacred opportunities to remind someone they are noticed, they matter. You don't need to have all the right answers in order to listen with compassion and acknowledge their feelings."

## Ripples project

Paul Wesselmann produces the Ripples Project, a weekly inspirational email newsletter distributed on Monday [helppeople](#) remember the gigantic

potential of tiny actions." To sign up for the newsletter or learn more about the project, visit [www.theripplesproject.org](http://www.theripplesproject.org).

## Related Links

[Youth crisis experts offer tips on connecting with teens](#)

### Advertisement

Do you know what sparks Sam?

[WATCH THE VIDEO](#)

Sam, Baby Boomer

THE POST-CRESCENT  
postcrescent.com

in partnership with  
**YAHOO!**

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™