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Former NBA player drops in at Cascade High School

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(Photo by Kalie Drago) James Donaldson, former NBA player, faced the eager crowd of students to address a somber topic.
By: Kalie Drago

James Donaldson, a name that resonates with basketball fanatics, spoke to Cascade School District students Tuesday, March 25. Donaldson played 14 seasons in the NBA along with playing for Washington State University.

He didn't come to give tips on how to master lay-ups or discuss the adrenaline rush from dunking - he came armed with advice and tips on a darker topic, that is as deeply engrained in his personal life as basketball in his professional life. Donaldson spent an hour and some minutes talking to students about mental health awareness and suicide prevention.

"Life is a journey, it's filled with ups and downs and twists and turns. And you really never know how its going to turn out," said Donaldson. "The reason I'm here today is to talk about some of the tough, challenging times in life that all of us are going to go through at some point in life."

Donaldson opened the presentation personally as if he was chatting with friends over coffee. Despite recalling the saddening elements that led up to his grapple with suicidal thoughts, he managed to keep the conversation moving fluidly and didn't hesitate to share.

"Last year, 2018, I went through a very difficult point in my life, where everything that could go

Leavenworth, WA

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Wind

Rain

Sun

51.8 °F

WSW Wind 3.4mph

Increasing Clouds

34 °F 58 °F

34 56 SAT

30 55 SUN

33 56 MON

35 60 TUE

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wrong, went wrong," said Donaldson. "(Eventually he said to himself) James, you've got to get out of this. I don't want people running around telling my story, I want to stick around and tell my story. And that was the beginning of me trying to work my way out of that darkness."

The tall man that was well known for executing basketball plays on the court was vulnerable as he branched into the parts of his life that led to the collapse of his mental health. He touched on his physical therapy business failing, his marriage failing and dealing with the loss of his mother.

"I could just feel the walls of the house closing in on me, I could feel this darkness coming over me, this loneliness, this pain," said Donaldson. "I started having these mental issues, where I asked myself 'is it even worth continuing to live?' I wanted to take my life. I didn't think my life was worth living."

He openly translated the harsh reality of contemplating suicide and the ways he had mapped out he could commit suicide - the rawness of a man that doubled as many people's basketball idol in his former years seemed to keep the students engrossed.

"And this is why I'm here today, to talk to you all about your lives. You're all going to go through tough times from time to time. Some of you may be going through tough times right now," said Donaldson.

Donaldson also shared a video of a girl in her junior year of high school that committed suicide. Since Donaldson isn't in the same age demographic with the same problems, this served as a link for the high schoolers to someone in more similar shoes. The video also illustrated the aftermath of taking one's life and the ripple effect it has on those intertwined in that person's life.

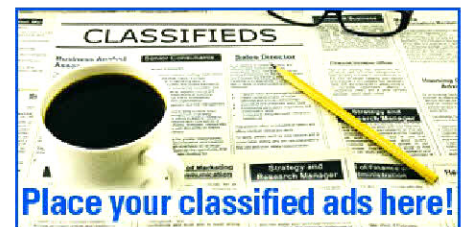
"She looked perfectly fine on the inside, but her diary entries showed she was struggling with a lot of things," said Donaldson. "This young girl when she took her life, you see her parents, how hurt they are. How much they're grasping for answers that she's not here to explain. So I want you all to think before you get in a deep, dark, depressing place what it's going to do to your family and friends. The people who are left behind are the ones who are really traumatized."


Since his own struggle with suicidal thoughts, Donaldson has found that in order to cope and combat the problem, he needed to find a purpose in life. He revealed that his purpose in life is his foundation, Your Gift of Life - a program focused on suicide prevention and mental health awareness.

"What helped me more than anything, more my doctor or my friends, was to go out and find a purpose for me to keep on staying here. That purpose turned out to be a non-profit foundation called Your Gift of Life," said Donaldson. "I want people to realize truly how much of a gift your life is. Don't throw it away, don't abuse it, don't take it for granted."

After the assembly, his presence at the high school wasn't over. Donaldson passed out his business cards with a reminder he is always willing to be a listening ear if needed. He stayed in Cascade High School throughout the day to visit classrooms and have lunch.

School News



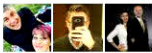



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