

suburban life

The Academy of Notre Dame de Namur unveils ND Cares, a school-wide program designed to give students the skills and support they need to thrive. page 68



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The Academy of Notre Dame de Namur

has always prided itself on its academic rigor and its ability to prepare students for college and beyond. As part of that mission to educate the “whole student,” the Catholic, independent, college-preparatory school in Villanova has introduced an all-encompassing program that prioritizes and protects the mental health of its all-girls’ student body.

ND Cares is a multipronged approach designed to ensure Notre Dame’s students have the tools needed to address mental health. The toolbox includes partnerships with organizations such as The Jed Foundation and The Social Institute to conduct needs assessments and help develop strategic plans for programming in the

Prioritizing Students’ Mental Health

The Academy of Notre Dame de Namur unveils ND Cares, a school-wide program designed to give students the skills and support they need to thrive.

by *Phil Gianficaro*

Earlier this year, Notre Dame launched ND Cares, a broad-based initiative focused on the well-being of students in every grade, from six through 12. The program provides these young women with the skills and resources needed to safeguard their own mental health, and to recognize when their classmates and friends may need help.

upper and middle schools.

The Jed Foundation is a nationally recognized nonprofit that helps protect emotional health in teens and young adults, providing them with the skills and support they need to thrive. Notre Dame is the first non-collegiate institution in Pennsylvania to partner with The Jed Foundation. The Social Institute, meanwhile, provides an online learning platform that empowers students to make positive choices on social media and reinforces character traits such as empathy, integrity, and teamwork.

“The girls are very interested in ND Cares,” says Head of School Laura M. Hotchkiss, Ed.D. “Even as the program was in design last year, we had a student group—Bring Change to Mind—talking about mental health. Some students are conditioned not to talk about mental health; this group is different. They were saying, ‘Yes, let’s talk about it.’ They worked with Notre Dame administrators, faculty, and staff to help bring mental health to the forefront.”





Stacy Kim, a Notre Dame middle school counselor, has helped lead an initiative to help students “find balance and establish healthy habits” when it comes to navigating social media.

The student group launched a campaign focused on mental health awareness, posting quotes throughout the school. The quotes were designed to share positive messages and lift up their peers, as well as, according to Dr. Hotchkiss, “to show those with mental health issues that they are not alone.”

“ND Cares was driven based on what I see from our girls,” says Dr. Hotchkiss. “As we move forward, it will grow based on what our counselors are reporting from the girls, how they’re feeling, their levels of success. This initiative opens everything up for them to talk about mental health.”

“Students and families became so disconnected from peers, teachers, and schools during COVID that it exacerbated the already growing mental health problem,” she continues. “COVID offered us all less time to have casual conversations in the hallways. We’ve become more aware of how important in-person relationships are.”

Now, middle school students will attend weekly seminars on topics such as “Balancing Technology, Social Media, and Other Distractions,” with each seminar providing a specific lesson related to ND Cares. The upper school will also include a seminar program, with an avenue for girls to explore the curriculum.

“It’s an hour every eight days in small groups with a counselor,” says Dr. Hotchkiss. “This will be a reflective process—getting student feedback and learning what they feel is going well at Notre Dame and what they need support with. We want to know what we’re missing using the student voice. And if a teacher recognizes signs a girl is in trouble, we’ll move it into the counselor’s office.”

‘Thoughtful and Ongoing’

As part of her role as a Notre Dame middle school counselor, Stacy Kim has played a key role in the partnership with The Social Institute. She has helped lead an initiative known as #WinAtSocial, with the goal of helping students “find balance and establish healthy habits” when it comes to navigating social media.

“The curriculum is designed to equip

students with the tools they need at the intersection of technology and well-being,” says Kim, who joined Notre Dame earlier this year. “We recently held an interactive class around #WinAtSocial, and the goal was to help the students understand how spending too much time on their phones, and on social media, can be a huge distraction and make it difficult to focus. We also had an open discussion about their ideas and preferences, showing them that [relying too heavily on] social media can make them miss out on real-world experiences.”

As the #WinAtSocial initiative expands, Kim expects to work more closely with students on topics such as privacy protection, cyber-bullying, and cultivating a network of positive influences.

In addition to Kim’s recent hiring, Notre Dame has expanded its ability to support students with the addition of Laura Schmidt as director of student support services and well-being. Schmidt is responsible for creating a safe, supportive school climate, instituting a plan to enhance and sustain student welfare, and fostering a culture of inclusion and belonging for all.

Schmidt, who was head of counseling at Cristo Rey Philadelphia High School prior to joining Notre Dame, believes the efficacy of ND Cares is rooted in its community-based approach.

“It’s not called Counselor Cares or Teacher Cares; it’s ND Cares, the whole school community,” she adds. “We’re all part of the students’ well-being. ND Cares is a good opportunity for us to take a 30,000-foot view of how to support our students. And The Jed Foundation will give us good feedback on how we’re doing as a counseling team and how to best implement our programs.”

The steps Notre Dame has taken so far have gone a long way to normalizing and

prioritizing students’ mental health. Schmidt believes this commitment is essential to helping students.

“September, the first month of school, is Suicide Awareness Month,” she says. “So, if we can talk about this right now, we can talk about anything. It gives someone permission to say something, to talk about how they may be feeling.”

“If someone is in need of spiritual wellness, they might go to church,” she continues. “If they need physical wellness, they see their doctor or get a trainer. We have to get people to treat mental health the same way. If we can talk about it openly, we can get them the support they need. We have to let our students know they don’t have to fix or solve it on their own.”

The importance of ND Cares cannot be overstated given the troubling increase nationally of teens and young adults who are experiencing distress in their mental health, from depression to anxiety to thoughts of self-harm. Dr. Hotchkiss says the program was created to be flexible, and will continue to evolve as needed.

“I was compelled to start ND Cares by the social media impact of well-being on the girls,” she says. “The pressure to measure up, to be perfect—we need to get the girls to understand that’s not real life. ND Cares is about relationship-building with faculty, students, and parents, and doing this in a thoughtful and ongoing way.” ■



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