

# What one Utah student learned in Hope Squad helped her save a friend's life

This is part of a series of interviews with young Utahns making a meaningful impact on their communities — and their way — mental health. Read more at sltrib.com.

In Utah, suicide is the leading cause of death for those between 10 and 17 and those between 18 and 24.

The Hope Squad — started by a Utah principal more than 25 years ago — teaches students how to advocate for themselves and their peers. On the secondary level, QPR is taught to students, which stands for question, persuade and refer.

"Hope Squad is the eyes and ears of the school," says Maddie, a high school student who serves as the president of the Hope Squad at her school and a Utah representative on the Hope Squad National Council. "They're not therapists, but they help their peers get the mental health help they need."

The experiment began in 1999 and eventually expanded to each school in the Provo City School District. Today, there's a Hope Squad in thousands of schools across the United States and Canada. And, according to founder Greg Hudnall, the effort has led to thousands of students being recognized for help and a dramatic decrease in suicide in the Provo City School District.

Hudnall says her six years with Hope Squad has changed her approach to mental health — and helped her save a life. This Q&A with her has been edited for length and clarity.

**Sara Weber: What made you want to get involved with Hope Squad? When did that start?**

**Maddie:** I learned about it in sixth grade, when the SBOs [student body officers] and members from the junior high Hope Squad came to try and recruit us. Within a month or so, I started to see those warning signs I was learning about in a friend of mine. I followed the steps in my QPR training, and I was able to refer him to a counselor and it ended up saving his life.

**What challenges do you face**



Maddie, a high school student who serves as the president of the Hope Squad at her school and a Utah representative on the Hope Squad National Council, says she and her peers are "the eyes and ears of the school."

Photo: courtesy of Maddie

**In your work with the Hope Squad?**

There is kind of a stigma around Hope Squad — people don't quite understand what it is. It can kind of seem like Hope Squad makes people a project ... they don't see it as genuine. There's also some misunderstanding about referring people to get the help that they need. So there's that element of getting around the stigma, both around mental health and Hope Squad.

**How do you get around those stigmas?**

Whenever someone asks me about [Hope Squad], I just correct them. We work with our administration a lot. And they support us in our activities, too. Having their support can help us seem more legitimate to the school.

We're also running activities for the school that are focused on destigmatizing mental health. We'll

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run a Kahoot! [a game-based learning platform] that could do some myth busting for students, or we'll pass out flyers or we'll do activities that teach a lesson about it.

**Can you tell me about the impacts you've seen of the work you do?**

I have watched me and my friends grow a lot as people. I've also seen lives saved — which is really cool. It's hard to have these conversations but, as we work together, we learn how to take care of ourselves while taking care of other people.

**Is that something that you've noticed in yourself as well?**  
Definitely. Hope Squad has

made me very aware. In school, I look around, I see people who are by themselves. And I don't think I necessarily did that before I joined Hope Squad. Whatever situation I'm in, I find myself looking for people who might need a friend.

I've also been able to check my own mental health, which I really appreciate.

**Do you think that mental health challenges are unique to Utah, unique to your age group or is it more pervasive?**

I think that most everyone struggles with mental health to some degree. But also I feel like it's a specific Utah problem, too. I've seen a lot of statistics about Utah — youth suicides being higher than the average across the nation — and I know that it is a very big problem in Utah. I'm very glad that we have Hope Squad and we have resources like SafeUT available here.

**For other young people who are interested in mental health work like this, what advice do you have for them?**

To get involved specifically with Hope Squad, it is a peer nomination process. If your school does not have a Hope Squad, reach out to your admin or reach out to a school counselor or teacher that you think would be a good advisor.

**Is there anything else you'd like people to know?**

Anyone can be a mental health advocate by just being a good friend, by being educated about mental health resources and being able to be aware of the people in your life and offer support to them when they need it.

**Which resources do you recommend?**

The Hope Squad website is awesome. Downloading the SafeUT app is good. There's maketok.org, which is also really awesome.

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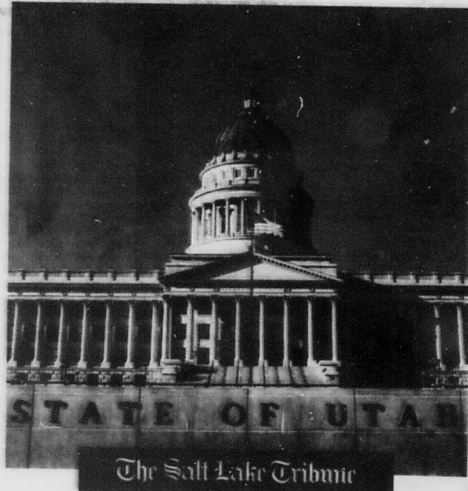
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