Fresh Check Day, a recent wellness event sponsored by the Jordan Porco Foundation, was held at the Betty Tipton Room in the Student Center at Eastern Connecticut State University. Its aim is to support student’s resilience and helping to develop positive coping strategies for mental health. Here, ECSU students Caraline Gartrell, a sophomore from Enfield, and Molly Bagley, a sophomore from Glastonbury, paint masks during an activity called ‘Mood Matters.’

ECSU targets mental health issues

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WILLIMANTIC — In an effort to raise suicide awareness and prevention, Eastern Connecticut State University hosted Fresh Check Day earlier this month.

A signature program of the Jordan Porco Foundation, Fresh Check Day involves students in interactive booths that deliver mental health and resource information in a fun and engaging way.

The Jordan Porco Foundation was founded in 2011 by Ernie and Marisa Porco after they lost their son, Jordan, to suicide when he was a freshman in college.

“For students with emerging mental health problems, the transition from high school to college can cause a lot of stress and anxiety,” said Sandra Rose-Zak, Eastern’s wellness promotion coordinator. “This event is really about developing resiliency and coping strategies and recognizing that you are not in this alone, and that there are a lot of resources and support available.”

Fresh Check Day utilizes a peer-to-peer messaging model.

“We’ve recognized that these messages are better said and received by peers,” said Rose-Zak. “When speaking to someone with a similar experience, you have a greater interest in what they’re saying. It’s a different impact when coming from peers.”

Fourteen student organizations — ranging from athletic teams to the Pride Alliance to the Student Government Association — staffed booths designed to inspire and educate those through tough times and about health resources.

The Visual Arts Club led a “web of connectivity,” where students used one continuous strand of yarn to circle pegs on a board that represented different secrets or life challenges.

Examples included “I feel alone,” “I’m a perfectionist,” “I have an eating disorder” or “I learn differently.”

One student noted the continuous strand further demonstrates that we’re all connected.

Other activities included planting “seeds of hope” and potting plants; writing “uplifting messages in a bottle”; and the “9 out of 10” booth, which explained that one out of 10 college students contemplates suicide, leaving nine to help the one.

Also present was The Conduit Center, which led reclined meditation sessions; Mansfield Massage LLC; and Cold Noses Warm Hearts, a nonprofit that brought three therapy dogs to campus.

Preparation for Fresh Check Day began last year with the recruitment and training of student volunteers.

“All our groups were versed in where the resources are on campus,” said Rose-Zak. “so if someone should say, ‘I have bulimia, is there a support group on campus?’ all of our groups know where to point that student.”

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