



# KALAMAZOO CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

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## A Healing Community

At times schools are faced with having to appropriately respond to an untimely death of a student or staff member. Last year in early November, Kalamazoo Christian High School mourned the loss of one of our students, Dawson Lute. When the Victim Services Coordinator from the Kalamazoo County Sheriff's office came to school to officially inform us that Dawson had taken his own life, we immediately implemented several crisis management protocols which included having mental health professionals on sight to help our students navigate the grief process brought on by this troubling event. The two or three days following Dawson's death were filled with tears, questions, stories, and reflection.

Two weeks ago marked the one-year anniversary of Dawson's death. A few days before the actual anniversary date, we offered times during the school day for students to think about and learn about strategies to cope with their own mental health concerns. On the actual date of the anniversary, the chapel talk, given by Ms. Sloterbeek, focused on our school theme: image reflecting—our individual identity; our purpose and place in this world, and the love that we receive not only from those around us but also from our faithful savior, Jesus Christ. After chapel, students were invited to the Student Center where some of the same counselors who were at school a year earlier returned to facilitate conversations of continued healing. Later in the day, students were invited outside, along the creek, to witness the planting of a tree in Dawson's memory. The anniversary again gave rise to grief—a different stage in the grieving process, however; on this anniversary there were fewer tears and more stories—recollections from Dawson's friends and teammates that celebrated his life and vibrant personality.

During the last couple of years, Kalamazoo Christian Schools have been more intentional about meeting our students' and staffs' mental health needs. The subject of mental health has become less stigmatized; more counseling opportunities have been made available; more information and resources have been shared within the school community; and there has been an increase in communication about specific mental health situations among students, staff, and parents. The anniversary of Dawson Lute's death brought back memories of Dawson's life and the impact he had on students and staff at Kalamazoo Christian High School. The anniversary was also a reminder of how important it is to be attentive to our own mental health and the mental health of those around us.

- **Dirk Walhout, High School Principal**