



## High School Students Spread Awareness and Raise Money for ALS Research

When the Biology Honors class kicked off a special course to learn more about neurological diseases, they turned it into a unified effort to educate their community and raise over \$3,000 for ALS research.

The ALS Association spoke to some of the folks behind the project.

It all began with a partnership between Great Valley High School, the Live Like Lou Center for ALS Research at the University of Pittsburgh Brain Institute, and the Beating the Odds Foundation, a Pennsylvania nonprofit that encourages kids to achieve success in school and in life. At the beginning of the last school year, starting in September 2018, the students took a special honors course written and led by Kathleen Crisi and Christina Medvec, who are biology teachers at Great Valley High.

Crisi, along with two professionals from the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine – Chris Donnelly, an Assistant Professor and Scientific Director of the Live Like Lou Center for ALS Research, and Christi Kolarcik, a Research Instructor who is also on The ALS Association National Board of Trustees, together taught a special Honors course to students. The goal of the course was to learn about neurological diseases, with a focus on ALS, and on research methods to prevent these diseases.

Seniors engaged with ALS researchers and visited ALS research labs at the University of Pittsburgh, including the lab of Udai Pandey, an Associate Professor at the University of Pittsburgh. The students also read books about people living with ALS and took part in lab studies at their local high school. They learned about assistive technology devices used by people living with the disease, and were able to try the devices out themselves.

As part of the Honors class, students also attended a talk with David Flaugh, a person living with ALS who was invited to speak to the students by Rocco Scalzi of the [Beating the Odds Foundation](#). David was diagnosed with ALS two years after taking the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. He spoke about his diagnosis, and struggles living with the disease. He also discussed how technology is helping people living with ALS to communicate with their power chairs and eye technology equipment to make their lives as comfortable as possible.



As part of an ongoing partnership with researchers at the Brain Institute at the University of Pittsburgh, GVHS Honors Biology 2 students and teachers visited Pitt where they worked with professors and scientists in neuroscience labs. Students also met with representatives from The ALS Association to try out the assistive technologies used by people with ALS.

Students had lunch with David and got to know him more. They asked questions about how he coped after receiving his diagnosis, the emotional impact on his family, and more. Many of the students were inspired by his resilience and later sent him letters thanking him for speaking with them.

In May, before the school year ended, the senior Honors students of Great Valley High put on a variety show. Many of the students were involved in directing and participating in the show, and after being so impacted by David Flaugh's talk, students decided to donate all proceeds from the variety show fundraiser to The ALS Association Western Pennsylvania Chapter in David's honor.

Both the course and the variety show were great successes and a wonderful example of youth investing time and effort to raise awareness and funds to fight ALS. As a result of their experience, many of the students have considered going on to pursue careers that would help people living with the disease.

It was a great first year for the Honors course. Kathleen Crisi is looking forward to beginning another year with the hope that the High School can continue its partnership with the University of Pittsburgh Brain Institute and The ALS Association Western Pennsylvania Chapter in its future curriculum and activities.