STUDENT SPOTLIGHT : Leah Factor and Kaitlin Bigham



Leah Factor

On the Sunday before Thanksgiving in Canton, MA, approximately 240 runners and walkers of all ages came out together for the first-ever Champions of Wellness 5K road race. Organized by Canton High School's Student Wellness Advisor Group (SWAG) and led by seniors Kaitlin Bigham and Leah Factor, the road race raised more than $5,000 for future student wellness and mental health initiatives, staff training, and scholarships. The race highlighted how physical wellness can promote mental well-being for the mix of students, staff, administrators, and local Canton residents who participated.

According to Canton Public Schools Wellness Coordinator Adam Hughes, Kaitlin and Leah are the embodiment of what student leadership should be in every way. When they came to him with the idea for an event to help support the mental health of their peers, the first thing they said was "We want to do something that will have positive impact and be meaningful for others." This quote is the resemblance of their leadership and the focus they put towards the event every day for two consecutive years. "It is their hard work, commitment, and drive that helped make this event one that will carry on for the future and have long lasting positive impact on the students in Canton," noted Adam.



Kaitlin Bigham

In addition to the highly successful 5K Road Race, Leah, Kaitlin, and the SWAG group are always seeking new ways to interact with their community to make a difference, be it through hosting backpack drives for incoming CHS students, selling mental health bracelets in school, participating in and leading discussions around faculty QPR trainings, or the training of 20 student allies who wear a green bandana daily, a visual cue to anyone struggling that signifies these students are trained to help others get the help they need.

While both girls are fortunate they have not faced an immense battle with mental health themselves, they do see the issues in some of their peers and do all they can to help. For Leah, she chooses to focus on mental health advocacy because she knows "the challenges of life are inevitable and everyone must know they are not alone in fighting whatever battles come their way. I hope my peers know they can count on me whenever they need a friend," noted Leah. Kaitlin offered similar sentiments, "I just hope that I can be seen as someone who people can go to for help or just someone to talk to if they feel alone."

Talking openly about mental health can be difficult for many students who may be afraid to expose themselves to their peers, out of fear of what their friends might think. Others, including students, faculty, and school staff may only speak lightly about mental health because they don't want to "offend" or "trigger" anyone in the room who might truly be struggling.

Do the girls think the work they're doing is helping to decrease the stigma around mental health at Canton High School? Absolutely. "I think it brings the topic of mental health into the spotlight. It forces those around us to think about what mental health means to them, and understand there are resources and people out there who care about you and your well-being," said Katilin.

KyleCares has played a prominent role in the two girls' lives, both with the impact on their school and as an influence in themselves as individuals. Leah shared, "KyleCares has inspired our community to become better and to want to do better. Our school has grown so much and become the type of community where mental health is not only recognized, but it is also talked about." Added Kaitlin, "being part of KyleCares has 100% changed my perspective on my high school career. They've taught me countless skills in how to cope and how to help others cope with their mental health struggles. KyleCares has the ability to change lives, and I can confidently say they even have the ability to save lives."