

Parents beg universities for help after rash of suicides

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YOUNG MINDS



After a sharp rise in the number of students ending their own lives, families say they should be told of warning signs

Sian Griffiths Education Editor

There's a shelf in the Kirkman family home on which the memorabilia of a young man's life are lovingly laid out.

Andrew Kirkman's first toy – a rattling plastic duck – his school ties, his matriculation photo, some of the objects he bought on his travels: all are on the shelf along with some of his most loved books.

Next month Andrew would have been 25. His mother, Wendy, a teacher, will spend the day "trying not to feel sad". She

will buy him a book, as she has done every year on his birthday. On August 31, the anniversary of the last time she saw him alive, she survived a day at school, and then came home and "cried".

Four years ago Andrew, a physics student at Balliol College, Oxford, killed himself in a tent in the city's Port Meadow. Days earlier, struggling with depression, the 20-year-old had been told to take medical leave from his studies; his parents were not told he was depressed, nor that academics were worried about him.

His mother believes that if they had been called and Andrew taken to hospital, he might still be alive. She says he would have seen medical leave as failure.

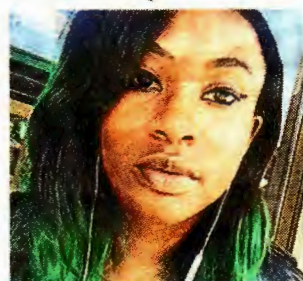
"One of the school's best pupils had not made it, you know. He was hoping to fix it over Christmas, I think, catch up with his studies, go back and get through his degree, but telling him to go home was the precipitating factor in him killing himself when he did. I am sure of that."

Three months after Andrew's death another Balliol student – also on medical leave – killed herself.

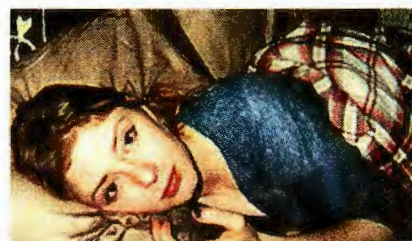
Wendy, from Northwood, northwest London, wants universities to learn from his tragedy. The family, including Andrew's two younger brothers, have taken part in a coming BBC3 documen-



Kim Long was studying law at Bristol



Lara Nosiru, a student at Bristol, died in January



Miranda Williams, left, a philosophy student, died in her first term at Bristol

Andrew Kirkman, left, as a child and at Oxford. He had been a top pupil at his school

tary about student suicides. Figures from the Office for National Statistics show suicides among university students have risen by 50% in 10 years, to 144 last year.

Wendy believes lives could be saved if universities developed policies that required them to contact families if they thought students were at risk. Some universities argue that students are adults

and that it breaches the Data Protection Act to share information with parents.

"All universities should have a policy that if students are at risk of self-harm or harming others, they should share that with parents or doctors," she said.

"In Andrew's case, he should have been taken to a place of safety and seen a mental health specialist, because he was at immediate risk, and then we should have been called. At 18, 19, 20, their brains are still those of adolescents."

At Bristol University four students have killed themselves in two years. Lara Nosiru, 23, was found dead at the bottom of Avon Gorge in January. Miranda Williams, a 19-year-old philosophy student, died in her first term, as did Daniel Green, 18, a history student, and Kim Long, 18, who was studying law. The inquest into the death of a fifth student has yet to be held.

Last year York University launched an inquiry after as many as five suicides.

Oxford said: "The university is always working to improve its welfare support for students. Its policy is that if a student is experiencing difficulties, it will normally encourage them to inform their parents. However, students are adults and we have a duty to respect their right to confidentiality."

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