

## **Minute for Alison Tobey Smart Memorial Fund**

**By Peter Hepner**

January 30, 2022

It's been a couple years since I've had the opportunity to address the congregation on behalf of the Alison Tobey Smart Memorial Fund Committee (ATS). Alison Smart was a member of Kenilworth Union Church and at age 17, died tragically from suicide. To both honor Alison's memory and prevent similar tragic events, Alison's parents, Sue and Jackson established the memorial fund in their daughter's name. More than 35 years later and with the help of more than 100 current and former committee members, the fund continues its important work.

You may find it shocking to know that according to the CDC, suicide is now the 2nd leading cause of death amongst 15–19 year olds. This disturbing statistic is likely a direct result of the rapid rise of anxiety and depression in our youth. A 2021 global analysis by the JAMA Network of more than 80,000 youth under the age of 19 concluded that 25% of children are currently depressed and 21% suffer from anxiety. These numbers have doubled since the start of the pandemic.

This is what makes the work of the Allison Tobey Smart Memorial Fund so important. The Fund's programming seeks to reduce suicide and suicide attempts by developing and implementing programs focused on problems common to many young adults such as substance abuse, self-destructive behavior, and depression. To highlight some of its efforts, ATS contributes to agencies that help strengthen teens' mental health, sends care packages to our college freshmen, celebrates and blesses Kenilworth Union's graduating seniors at an annual senior brunch, distributes awards to young people who served this community with distinction, and offers confidential financial aid to families in need who are struggling to provide treatment for their teenagers. We are also beginning our valentine project when we sign and send valentines to all of our college freshman. Please join us in the Culbertson Room after the service to sign valentines—whether you know the kids or not. All notes from members of their church are meaningful.

While it is important to know what the ATS memorial fund does, it is equally important to know what you can do. Depression and anxiety are frequently quiet struggles, however there are warning signs. Indicators of suicidal behavior include talking about dying, changes in personality, behavior, sleep patterns or eating habits, and a fear of losing control. We need to do more for our kids...by staying involved in their lives and letting them know that we care about them...that God cares about them. It is important to note that counseling services are a critical component in helping protect our youth. A study by the National Library of Medicine concluded that suicide prevention interventions are effective in preventing completed and attempted suicides and should be widely implemented. As such, if a student has any suicidal thoughts, it is always important for them to let others know, such as members of the school, church, family, or friends. Talking about mental health has proven to be an important tool in improving mental health.

So I am proud to report that the mission of the Alison Tobey Smart Memorial Fund continues today 37 years later; brining awareness to mental health and bringing support to the youth of this church and the surrounding community. Following the service, each of you will receive a bookmark in honor of Alison. This bookmark carries the names and contact information for the ATS supported agencies focused on the mental health of young adults. Please feel free to use that information or share it with friends. Thank you.