

Students with disabilities program hires director

WSU ROAR leaders look to expand enrollment, increase course duration

By **Jayce Carral**
Evergreen reporter

WSU ROAR (Responsibility Opportunities Advocacy and Respect) has recruited a new director for the program.

WSU ROAR is a post-secondary education program designed for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). It is a two-year, non-degree seeking program which guides students toward their career goals and encourages them to live independently, said Brenda Barrio, WSU ROAR co-founder.

WSU ROAR students attend audited courses, engage in social activities and workshops on various topics, Barrio said. Audited courses are classes that do not result in credits.

Falash said some of the workshops WSU ROAR students attend include topics such as communication, human sexuality and health. Helping students obtain internships in their field of interest is also an important part of the program, he said.

"We are providing experiences that push the envelope," Barrio said. "They're not only capable of doing what everyone else is capable of doing, but also succeeding in doing so."

She said it is difficult for students with I/DD to enroll into a university. It is common for the students to attend specialized education in their pre-secondary schooling, so the students do not have the requirements most universities look for, she said. Those requirements include four years of English or math.

Universities also require scores from standardized tests



BENJAMIN MICHAELIS | THE DAILY EVERGREEN

Brenda Barrio, assistant professor of special education, left, and Tom Falash, WSU ROAR director discuss visions for expanding the program across regional campuses Tuesday in the Education Addition building.

like SAT and ACT, which may be difficult for I/DD students to complete, said Tom Falash, WSU ROAR's new director.

Falash said he was a special education teacher in pre-secondary public schools. He has two sons who were in special education programs during school, and his new position allows him to apply the skills he learned working with I/DD students, he said.

"I've seen them struggle and overcome and become stronger human beings," Falash said.

He said he is looking forward to the opportunity of expanding the program.

As it continues, Barrio said she wants WSU ROAR to become a four-year program and grow admittance exponentially. Ten years from now, Barrio said she hopes to see the program expand to other college campuses.

"They are wanting and very willing to live independent and pursue a career of their choosing," she said. "We are breaking that barrier of what it means to

be a college student."

Barrio said WSU ROAR, which began August 2018, is the seventh program of its kind and the first in the Northwest. There are currently four students enrolled in WSU ROAR.

Falash said WSU ROAR students live on-campus and are encouraged to act independently.

Barrio said when needed, students can receive help from assisted-living advisers partnered with the program. The advisers also organize events that encourage socialization

such as a movie or bowling night.

"The diversity within our university needs to be expanded," Barrio said, "not just including people from diverse backgrounds, but also people of diverse abilities."

The program will grow as it continues, Falash said. Becoming inclusive and known for its inclusivity is one of the program's goals.

"We are not the face of the program," Falash said. "We just run the program. The students are the focus of the program."

Hilinski | Continued from Page 1

Hilinski. Linebacker Peyton Pelluer had informed Kelly that Tyler was dead.

That moment, that day and that tragedy will forever be etched in the minds of the Hilinski family.

“He’s my baby, and I just loved being with that sweet kid.”

Kym Hilinski
mother

"I always have to go back and remind myself that Tyler wouldn't want me to sit in a room and cry all day long," Kym said, "even though sometimes that's what I feel like doing."

Now the family is investing in mental health practices and trainings to ensure this doesn't happen to another student-athlete again.

In October, Hilinski's Hope brought a program called Strength is Asking for Help: Athlete to Athlete Mental Health Training to WSU. The program incorporates a course called Behind Happy Faces, which helps people cope with mental health and the bystander intervention program Step Up.

Hilinski's Hope paid for mental health experts to come to Pullman and train a group of athletes on the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee (SAAC), who facilitated the program through three training sessions over two months

to fellow student athletes.

Andrew Cooper, Ray Littles and Tierney Silliman were all members of the SAAC mental health committee who helped lead the trainings.

Cooper, SAAC president and junior track and field athlete, said the program opened his eyes and helped start a conversation about student-athlete mental health at WSU.

He said athletes face challenges most people do not because of the pressure to act tough, which can be overwhelming.

"Being in a space where it's safe," Cooper said, "where you're encouraged to be authentic, honest and vulnerable is unique, and something that hasn't been here before."

Littles, SAAC member and senior track and field athlete, said in the past mental health trainings have occurred in reaction to a tragedy, but this time they were performed proactively.

"These trainings did a good job of addressing the fact that you need to check yourself every day and just see how you're feeling," he said.

Silliman, who is also a SAAC member and redshirt junior track and field athlete, said the trainings gave athletes tools to cope with mental health issues, which they could translate into living better lives.

Silliman said she went into the trainings with the belief she had it figured out and then learned how to open up about her own struggles.

She said the progress Hilinski's Hope has made bringing awareness to student-athlete mental health over the past year has been incredible.

"Even though it was born from something horrific," Silliman said, "the passion that the family has for mental health and getting their message out

RESOURCES

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: **1-800-273-8255**
- WSU Counseling, Psychological Services: **509-335-4511**
- WSU after hours: **509-335-2159**

there really has been a blessing for the university."

Cooper never met Tyler, but he remembers seeing him while standing in line at Panda Express the Monday after the quarterback led WSU to a comeback victory over Boise State. Cooper said Tyler smiled and it made his day.

"I think as tragic as Tyler's passing was, how drastically it started the conversation and opened the floodgates for us to talk about mental health has been profound," he said.

This program has also been brought to Eastern Washington University and University of Idaho. The goal is to eventually bring it to schools around the country.

Mark said currently they are in a position of collecting data and providing the training as they try to study the effectiveness of the program over a longer period of time.

Hilinski's Hope is currently in contact with several universities including University of Michigan, Boise State University and South Carolina University about potentially bringing the program to them.

Mark said Hilinski's Hope can step in as a funding mechanism for schools that don't have the resources or budget to implement the program on their own.

Eventually, Mark hopes universities will invest in the trainings so it becomes a part of their budget. He said mental health is a complex problem where people have a hard time speaking up.

"Tyler could tell me anything," Mark said, "but he couldn't tell me he was sick, he couldn't tell me he was going to steal a gun and end his life."

The goal of Hilinski's Hope is not to prevent suicides, but improve and address the mental health issues in a student-athlete's life, Mark said.

"We know by doing that," he said, "we have saved dozens if not hundreds of lives not because we've done something, but because we've continued to talk about it."

The Hilinski's are currently in the process of creating a scholarship at WSU in Tyler's name. It will be called the Tyler Hilinski Memorial Scholarship and will

be officially established soon, said Trevor Durham, associate vice president at the WSU Foundation, in an email.

The scholarship is expected to be worth \$1,000 and will start to be awarded in fall 2019, Durham wrote.

The criteria for qualifying for the scholarship has yet to be finalized, Durham wrote. But Kym said it will be given to a student-athlete who maintains a GPA of 3.0 or above.

Donors have given \$71,172 to the university in Tyler's name as of Dec. 31, 2018, Durham wrote.

Kym said they receive calls, emails and texts throughout each day thanking them for sharing Tyler's story and destigmatizing mental illness.

Both Mark and Kym hear stories frequently from people who faced similar situations, which has helped them get through the loss of their son.

Mark said they are glad they have been able to bring attention to student-athlete mental health while continuing to honor Tyler.

"I feel positive that we're going in the right direction," he said, "but it's an awfully long road to make a lot of progress."

Mark and Kym said they talk about Tyler all the time and it would take hours to explain what they remember most about him.

"I think what I miss is just looking at that sweet smile, hearing his voice say 'Hey Mama' and just being with him," Kym said. "He's my baby, and I just loved being with that sweet kid."