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Your Turn: Campus, city should see suicide as more than a 'personal issue'

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Letter to the Editor

As many of you know, last week, a student at Ohio University, Patrick Gorman, committed suicide. I can't say that I was best friends with Pat, but I did have the pleasure of having a conversation with him two or three times every week last year. He was the cashier at the store where I bought beer, and he was a roommate of a student who is very active with Students for a Democratic Society. For those of you who knew him, he was one of the warmest people I have ever met. Pat went out of his way to say hello, to ask how your day was and what plans you had for the weekend. He genuinely cared about other students and was committed to social justice. We had many a conversation about student politics on campus, as well as national electoral politics. Pat made it a point to ask about your goals, hopes and dreams. Just from talking to Pat, you could tell he had a heart the size of the ocean. I'm going to miss Pat, as I'm sure many others on campus will as well.

Pat's death struck a chord with me that I have not been able to shake for the last couple days. In part because of the way two of my classes have discussed suicide this week. Suicide is still a taboo in our society and on our campus. In America, we're taught that suicide is an act of an irrational, disturbed human being. Pat was none of these things. They say it is a "personal problem" and simply a result of emotional problems. This washes away the American society's role in creating the situation where someone would want to commit suicide. We're told, if you are depressed, take these pills; "you" have a problem, we can fix "your" problem. Never is the role of the alienation of our modern consumer culture questioned. Yet we live in a society where mass communication uses Freudian psychology to exploit our insecurities, our hopes, desires and our fears for profit and power. It is a society that often sees human beings as expendable. It is a society that has entirely transformed social relations, and placed them on a computer screen; a society where "choice" means choosing the scent of your deodorant stick.

Maybe those who chose to take their lives were fed up by a society that asks them to take jobs of little meaning or substance. Maybe they took their lives because they simply did not wish to live their lives climbing a social ladder to nowhere. Maybe mounting student debt, a run in with the police, or a feeling of total social isolation leads a person to choose to take their own life. I don't know the answers to these questions, but it is a lie to say that a suicide on our campus is only a personal issue. It is a community problem, and concerns us all.

As tragic and depressing as Pat's suicide is, we can grow, and must grow from our experiences. Pat's death shows us how important it is that we build a community where everyone feels welcomed, valued and relevant. Pat's presence on this campus and in this world was a blessing, and our campus will miss him dearly.

Will Klatt is a senior studying media studies.

