



Talbot Goes Purple: Taking a Stand Against Opioid Abuse

Leadership Maryland alumni contribute significantly to influential community awareness program

One of the keystones of our mission at Leadership Maryland is to inform leaders on the vital issues impacting our state and empower them with the information and connections they need to become forces for meaningful change. So it's no surprise that when a community on Maryland's Eastern Shore launched a county-wide awareness campaign aimed at combating the opioid epidemic, many of the individuals behind its powerful impact were Leadership Maryland alumni.

The initiative is known as Talbot Goes Purple, and it was spearheaded by Lucie Hughes '17, past president of the Tidewater Rotary Club in Easton, and Talbot County Sheriff Joe Gamble. The idea was born in 2017, when Sheriff Gamble presented to the Tidewater Rotary Club about opioid abuse and its devastating effects on families in Talbot County, throughout Maryland and across the country. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the number of overdose deaths per year involving opioids increased six times over between 1999 and 2017 nationwide.

Sheriff Gamble stressed the importance of educating people, especially parents and children, about the dangers of opioids, and how the path to addiction most often begins with prescription medications. Inspired by his impassioned speech, the Tidewater Rotary Club felt compelled to help address the issue in their own community.

"When Joe came to speak to us, I had just been elected president and wanted our club to have a cause to focus on for the year. After hearing him speak, I approached our executive board and suggested we do something around addiction and the opioid epidemic and they agreed," said Lucie. "I knew Joe personally, and I went to him and offered money from the Tidewater Rotary Club to buy a new drug dog for the county. And he said, 'I don't need another drug dog, what I need is an awareness and education campaign around substance abuse and the opioid epidemic.' So we agreed to do that."

"I needed people who were willing to do the hard work and help me pull this campaign off," said Sheriff Gamble. "Lucie stepped up immediately, and her Rotary Club was all in, and it just started from there."



Maryland Comptroller Peter Franchot (center) presented the William Donald Schaefer Helping People Award to Talbot Goes Purple founders Sheriff Joe Gamble (left) and Lucie Hughes '17 (right) in April 2019.

Together Lucie, Sheriff Gamble and the Tidewater Rotary Club came up with a campaign based on THP Purple Project, a high-school substance-abuse awareness initiative founded by former NBA player Chris Herren. The mission of Talbot Goes Purple was simple: to engage the community in turning the entire county purple for the month of September and to raise awareness and inspire informed conversations about prescription pills and opioid addiction.

To get the initiative off the ground, Sheriff Gamble and Lucie began soliciting support from key business owners in the area, many of whom happened to be Lucie's fellow Leadership Maryland members. One of the first organizations she approached was the local electric distribution company, Easton Utilities, led by CEO Hugh Grunden '03 and CFO Steve Ochse '18.



Easton Utilities Headquarters

“Lucie came to us and asked how we could help elevate the visibility of this project to garner more awareness and start more conversations,” said Hugh. “We do a lot of Christmas decorating during the holiday season, so we knew we had a core competency to illuminate the downtown streets and businesses,” said Hugh. “So, we got to work, but instead of Christmas colors, we used purple.”

“Hugh and I happened to be at a meeting where Lucie spoke about the concept of Talbot Goes Purple, and we turned and looked at each other and realized we could help turn the town purple, literally,” said Steve. “The lightbulb went off, pun intended, that we could participate in a big way and with Hugh’s leadership, we pulled together the resources we needed to make it happen.”

David Fike '16 (LM), then the publisher of Talbot County’s daily newspaper, *The Star Democrat*, was also quick to offer his support for the project.

“Once Lucie and Joe explained what they were trying to accomplish and the movement they were trying to create in our town, it was an easy ‘yes’ for me,” said David. “I have seen how opioid abuse has affected families in our community, either through people I’ve known or people I’ve read about. It’s devastating what it does to families – not only to the individual who is addicted, but the rest of the extended family as well. So I put my thinking cap on as to how we could assist the process and get the message out there even more.”

Talbot Goes Purple launched in September 2017. The month began with a special edition of *The Star Democrat* on newsstands featuring a purple masthead and dedicated entirely to news related to opioid abuse in the community, local initiatives to curb it, and educational information on addiction and recovery. The paper followed with a front-page story each day of the month that told the story of someone in the community who had overcome substance abuse or had experienced its negative effects. The paper also waived its online paywall for the month so more people could access the Talbot Goes Purple content.

In addition, a public lighting ceremony was held at the Talbot County Court House in Easton. Local dignitaries, community leaders and neighbors gathered as Easton Utilities flipped the

switch on 14,000 purple lights and 75 purple spotlights illuminating the historic downtown district.

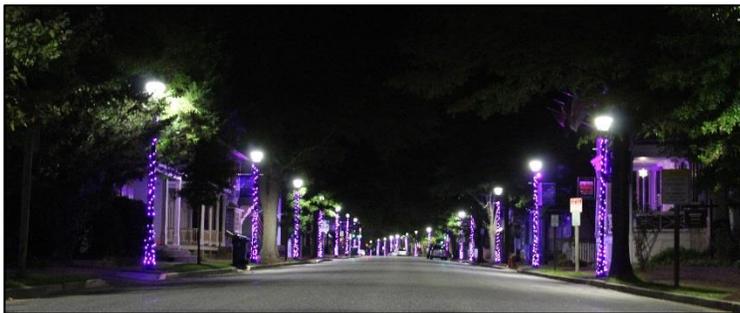
“We could not have done this without Hugh and Dave’s support – the visibility they gave us with the streetlights and the newspaper coverage was really our tipping point,” said Lucie. “We spoke to more than 100 clubs, businesses and organizations, and everywhere we went, there wasn’t anyone in the room who had not been touched by substance abuse. Everyone had a story and wanted to get on board. We have a large recovery community here in Easton and Talbot Goes Purple gave us a platform to talk about it and everyone embraced us.”



A fountain in downtown Easton

Talbot Goes Purple quickly gained momentum as more and more people joined the effort to turn the town purple. There were no set instructions for how local businesses and organizations should support the movement, they were simply given educational messaging and asked to share it in any way they could. Restaurants offered purple dessert specials, jewelry stores created purple window displays, and nail salons offered discounts on purple nail polish. Schools held “Purple Fridays” and a local electric supply company sold purple lightbulbs so neighbors could show their support with their home porch lights. Senator Addie Eckhardt ’01, representing the local district, even traded in her signature pink wardrobe and wore purple throughout the month.

Mike Hiner ’16, president of Willow Construction, was one of many local business leaders and Leadership Maryland alumni who joined the effort, changing his company’s exterior lights to purple and purchasing purple t-shirts for his workers to wear on job sites.



Hanson Street in Easton

“We are in a business where there is always a threat of drug use, so we have especially taken on this cause for the sake of our own employees to make sure they’re safe and aware. We encourage them to follow Sheriff Gamble’s advice to only take opioids exactly as prescribed, dispose of them properly, and keep them away from their kids,” he said. “And we’re trying to keep that conversation going

all year long in our safety meetings. We also recently invited Lucie and Sheriff Gamble to one of our jobsites to speak with all of our subcontractors.”

The first campaign was so successful, it returned in September 2018 with expanded messaging and reach. Neighboring counties Dorchester, Caroline, Kent, Queen Anne’s, Somerset, and even Sussex County in Delaware and Washington County in Western Maryland joined the

movement and turned purple for the month. And Lucie and Sheriff Gamble are looking forward to even more people joining the movement in 2019.

“It has grown beyond our wildest belief,” said Sheriff Gamble. “And it’s not about me or Lucie; this is about communities rising up and doing something and fighting back against this epidemic, and the best way to do that is through education. And statewide, prescription opioid deaths dropped in 2018, and locally, our drop boxes are overflowing with prescription pills that people are turning over, so we know people are hearing the message and beginning to get it.”



A building in historic downtown Easton

“One father reached out to Joe to tell him he was driving his teenage son home from school, and his son said he didn’t understand all this ‘purple’ stuff and how it was supposed to make any difference at all. So they started talking about it, and an hour and a half later, they were still talking about it. We have given people the platform to be able to have this conversation,” said Lucie.

Hugh believes the success of Talbot Goes Purple speaks to the spirit of the Talbot County community. Easton Utilities has donated more than 500 manhours to date to lighting a portion of the county’s streets in purple.

“Talbot County is a community where volunteerism has always run strong,” he said. “I was born and raised here, and it has always been a community that will address a problem head on, and I think we really did that. We were thrilled to be invited to participate in such an important project, and we brought something to the table that I don’t think others could have offered. It was a huge team effort.”

Sheriff Gamble is not surprised that many of the key players in this movement are Leadership Maryland alumni.

“The people who I know who have gone through Leadership Maryland are the movers and shakers in our community. Lucie, Hugh, David - they get stuff done and are community-minded people. They don’t just talk about being a part of the community, they are a part of the community,” he said.

“Hugh and I both went through Leadership Maryland, and a big focus is working together with partners in the community, and that’s what happened with this project,” said Steve.

“Leadership Maryland makes you aware of issues around the state, and opioids were a main topic when we talked about inner city issues, judicial issues, just social issues in general,” said Mike. “Everyone can recognize that the opioid issue is at the root of many of our problems, and as Leadership Maryland graduates, we are compelled to be problem-solvers and help spread this message that people need to be aware of how dangerous this substance is.”

Lucie agrees that her Leadership Maryland experience contributed to Talbot Goes Purple's success.

"Leadership Maryland exposes you to different ways of doing things and different ways to approach things. That helped me look at Talbot Goes Purple from different angles and frame my questioning in a good way," she said. "It was amazing to me when I looked back and saw how many people from Leadership Maryland supported us and were involved."

To support Talbot Goes Purple, Lucie encourages everyone to follow @TalbotGoesPurple on Facebook, share the educational information and begin their own conversations about opioids. Donations are also accepted at talbotgoespurple.org, and purple t-shirts, sweatshirts, hats and lights are available for those who would like to turn their own communities purple.

To learn more about Leadership Maryland, please visit leadershipmd.org.