

In a Final Four state girls basketball rematch, the Arapahoe Warriors are set to meet the Valor Eagles to kick off the '22-23 season. However, the night will hold a lot more meaning beyond just that.

Arapahoe High School has a history of a foundation benefit game going back to 2018. Girls basketball head coach [Jerry Knaflec](#) began the tradition of using the sport to raise awareness for teen suicide and mental health after the Warriors saw a time of struggle as two students took their lives in 2018 and another in 2019. Suicide prevention is a cause near and dear to the Arapahoe community and this game allows for raising conversation on the topic. Principal Natalie Pramenko said when teen suicide became a more frequent issue, the old way of thinking was don't talk about it or other people will do it. But, she added, we now know that it's important to share messages about how to find help.

The 2022 foundation benefit takes place Nov. 26 at Sitting Eagle Gym, with the girls kicking things off against Valor at 5:30 p.m., followed by the boys, who play at 7:30 p.m. The price of entry is a donation, with all proceeds going to the Second Wind Fund, a youth suicide prevention organization.

Playing Valor this year instead of the school's original opponent, Regis Jesuit, is especially meaningful to the Valor community, as one of the school's staff members committed suicide last fall. The culture of the event will be special, Knaflec said, considering the girls' team has a strong relationship with Valor—one that transcends just being frequent opponents. Last fall, for example, when Valor's gym flooded, the Warriors lent a hand and shared their gym with the Eagles. The two teams held several practices and got to know each other and many of the athletes on both teams have played together and against each other in club basketball for years.

In regards to last year's loss against Valor in the Final Four, Knaflec emphasized the girls' and coaches' bond. "We put away our friendships just for that game, but right afterward we were back to caring about one another and hugging one another," he said. "We even met them at center court and prayed after the game."

Senior captain Sydney White said the team is excited not only for the rematch but the meaning behind the game.

"I think it goes to show that sports and basketball can bring people together," she said. "And it makes it more important because we're playing for a good cause."

This year's girls' foundation game will be played a little differently than usual. The first half will focus on equal playing time for both teams and seeing everyone get on the floor. The third quarter will be played with the intensity and competitiveness you would see in the fourth quarter of a normal game. And for the fourth quarter, the two teams will mix together and play in unity. Knaflec made this choice with Valor head coach Jessika Caldwell to make a point to all in

attendance that everyone will always have someone there for them. “Everyone could have friends or people to look out for them that they don’t even know about,” Knaflex said.

Beyond just the game, the night includes the only girls-boys double header of the season. There will also be a silent auction, food trucks and donation opportunities to support the cause. Speakers from Second Wind and Brought to Reality (BTR) will speak in between the two games as well.

Knafelc urges students to show their support Saturday.

“You’ll come to this game and you’ll walk out refreshed and excited about knowing that you’re helping other students or teenagers that might not even go to this school; potentially even the person sitting next to you,” he said. “And what a great opportunity over Thanksgiving weekend to be able to feel that way.”