



The Lighthouse

Newsletter of Touched by Suicide, Survivors Gather

Volume 7 Issue 4

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From the Editor **AS WE SEE IT: The Lighthouse in Retrospect**

In 2002 my wife and I discovered Touch by Suicide, Survivors Gather. We were hurting and realized that we needed help. Our daughter had died by suicide in early 2002 and we were reeling from that loss. We had all the symptoms that are common to suicide survivors and were looking for a way out of that pit of agony and sorrow. Would our grief last forever? Could we ever return to "normal"? What did we need to do to help us face a new reality...one without Susan?

Attending sessions of the support group turned out to be a comforting lifesaver. Over time we began to emerge from the mental and emotional pain that had consumed us. Also, we realized that we were not alone in facing the aftermath of suicide. It wasn't just us, but there were others who were confronting similar situations and needs.

That fall the group talked about reaching beyond ourselves to help others understand the nature of suicide, its impact on survivors and how suicide might be prevented. One idea was to provide a newsletter to survivors, community organizations and services, various responder groups and individuals, and to the general public within our three counties and beyond.

I had previous experience in editing newsletters and felt I could make a contribution by volunteering to undertake such a project. With assistance and encouragement from Sinnissippi Centers (a mental health provider) The Lighthouse newsletter was launched in spring, 2003. Sinnissippi Centers agreed to provide printing and mailing services four times a year. That first year we skipped summer and there were three issues in the first volume. Since then, every year we have published the newsletter each season...summer, fall, winter, spring. Now we have completed Volume 7 with the 27th issue of The Lighthouse! And I have managed to compose a page one editorial for each issue.

Where do we go from here? Hopefully, there can be many more volumes if all goes well. Your comments, reactions and suggestions are always welcome and I especially appreciate receiving stories, poems, essays, reviews and responses that are such an essential ingredient to the uniqueness of The Lighthouse.

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Words of Encouragement

May there be winds to disperse
the air of sadness
And rains to make parched
hopes rise again.

Walks for Suicide Prevention

Whiteside County, Illinois, has a suicide rate for teenagers twice the state average. There have been six suicides of students or recent graduates of Sterling High School (in that county).

The **"Out of the Darkness Walk" will be held May 23, 2010**, in Sterling to raise funds for research on suicide prevention. Registration will begin at 1 PM at the high school with the walk **starting at 2 PM**. It ends at the high school with a special memorial service for those lost to suicide. This is the second year for the walk and last year nearly \$6,000 was raised. For further **information** contact **crobinson@sterlingschools.org**.

A **"Living Works Community Walk For Suicide"** will be held **June 5, 2010** in Princeton, Illinois. Concerned citizens from Princeton and surrounding communities initiated this fund raiser to heighten awareness and educate the public on prevention.

The money raised will be used to send two local persons to a training workshop so they can carry out two-day sessions in the area. For further information contact: **ccompton@WZOEradio.com** or **www.livingworkssuicidewalk.com**.

Back in Time

On December 24, 1888, in a Provencal town in France, a 35-year old Dutch artist's ear had been severed and he was bleeding from his head. Vincent van Gough had been living in a run-down residence known as the Yellow House with another painter, Paul Gauguin.

The drama that took place that evening continues to be somewhat of a mystery, and thereby motivation for further investigation and interpretation. It is known that Gauguin was questioned by the police that night and then left immediately for Paris.

Much has been written about the tribulations of van Gough – his drinking, mental anguish, violent seizures and ambiguities. He was born in 1853 and died by suicide in 1890.

Adam Gopnik's critique, "van Gough's Ear," New Yorker Magazine, January 4, 2010, presents a review of events in van Gough's life and relates revisionists' interpretations of the lives of these two famous artists... and what may have taken place that Christmas Eve in 1888.

Bullying Leads to Suicide

Three Massachusetts teenagers pleaded not guilty in the bullying of a 15 year-old girl who died by suicide after months of threats and harassment. They are among six teens charged in what prosecutors said was "unrelenting bullying". It was said that she was harassed after having a brief relationship with a popular boy. A pretrial hearing is set for September 15.

Note: 90% of victims are unable to admit that they have been hazed. Reported in an article, "Hazed and Confused," in April 10, 2010, Family Circle magazine.

A Guide for Funeral Directors

In 2009 the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) published **Supporting Survivors of Suicide Loss**. This 16-page guide is specifically directed to funeral home personnel and is available at no cost. The format and design of this quality publication is attractively presented and illustrated, the content is pertinent and timely, and the Q&A section seems to be appropriately focused.

The guide addresses the following topics:

- Death by Suicide – What’s different?
- Sudden Loss – What survivors feel
- Stigma of Suicide – Subtle messages in mere words
- Turbulent Emotions of Suicide Loss
- Calming the Storm – Showing sensitivity to complex survivor needs
- Compassionate Fatigue – Tending to those in need, yourself first and foremost
- Frequently Asked Questions – About suicide and its immediate aftermath
- Resources – For you, your clients, recommended reading

The two authors of this publication are directors of the Suicide Prevention Action Network USA and the Suicide Prevention Resource Center. We felt that it would be a worthy project to distribute this guide to all funeral homes in our three-county service area. With a call to **SAMHSA’s Health Information Network** (1-877-726-4727) we were able to obtain 25 copies. The same could have been done by ordering or downloading at: www.samhsa.gov/shin.

A Good Friend Takes His Life

This part of my life goes back 35 years when a good friend died by suicide. I am now 79 years old, and I had known Jack since I was 15 and he was 13. We had grown closer as the years went by and, in fact, we felt more like family. It was a shock when his brother, Bud, called with the news about Jack’s suicide. I was a good buddy with both Jack and Bud so it hit us both exceptionally hard; in fact, our entire group felt crushed. It was probably the first time in our relatively early years that suicide had been a factor in our lives. It’s an unhappy thing to bear.

As far as anyone could tell, Jack’s life was going well and, from outward appearances, he and his family were doing fine, but apparently not. He had married a gal who was divorced with four children. They had dated for a couple of years before their marriage in what seemed to be a happy, successful life for ten years. Whenever Jack, his wife Mae and family came to our home everything seemed to be normal.

I had known Jack for many years before his marriage. We had grown up in Forest Park, IL. We were in a group of young boys and girls who enjoyed being together. We especially liked the roller skating rink where the “gang” often went to have fun. Sometimes we went to someone’s home to play indoor games such as Monopoly or Rummy. Often we’d listen to music and dance in a basement room made for dancing.

He and I often did things together such as putting around the garage while helping his older brother fix cars. Jack also had a younger brother, Gene, and a sister who seemed to like my being around. Jack had left the house one morning on the way to work. However, he didn’t leave the garage and was found after he had inhaled fumes from the car exhaust. After his suicide we were all left with the question – why? As far as we knew there was no clue. I could tell from phone conversations or talking with mutual friends at the funeral that they were quite shook up when talking about Jack. We all thought him to be a dependable and sincere friend who would always be there when we needed him.

Over the years, some of the gang got married, went away to school or left for other reasons. We still kept in touch and saw one another whenever we could. Now, there are not many of the gang left. Jack’s wife passed away several years ago. She had moved to another state but still kept in touch. We miss seeing Jack and his family, and I miss him very much to this day but realize that things can never be the same.

Jerry Beck
Mt Morris, IL

A Day in a Life

As a child welfare professional, I spent years working with kids who were abused and neglected. Mental Health wasn't really my bag, and any of my clients who had those issues were generally treated at the Community Mental Health facility by trained psychiatric workers. But there was one kid...

She was a young teen, maybe 15, with thick, wavy, strawberry-blond hair and big blue eyes. The kid was a little soft and a bit full-figured, but beautiful – I can't really say about her smile, since I never saw one, but otherwise she had the suggestion of "TV commercial for teen beauty products" beautiful.

It was snowing – the kind of snow that messes up traffic and sends employees home early. I was looking out at the weather and wondering if I should leave for the day when the call came in. She had been housed in a temporary foster home until her case went to court... I guess she couldn't wait to see what would happen. She must not have believed me when I told her, "I'm gonna get you some help dealing with all this, kiddo; you're gonna be OK!"

The ambulance was already on the way to the hospital, to get her stomach pumped. "Meet them at the Fourth Floor waiting room," the cop told me. "Fourth Floor" was code for Psych Ward.

"But...will she be OK?" I tried to sound professional, but the hand holding the phone was shaking. "She was semi-conscious when they found her, so that's a good sign." A good sign.

I asked my boss, "What am I supposed to do when I get there? I'm not a psych worker; I don't know what to do for an attempted suicide!"

My boss hesitated, then said quietly, "She doesn't have a psych worker yet. She doesn't have anybody right now. The only person she knows is you."

I don't remember driving through the snow storm to get to the hospital. I was still shaking when I got there, but could pass it off as cold and wet. They vigorously checked out my ID and credentials and even went through my purse, "Just like visiting the prison," I thought.

Then they pointed me to the waiting room, "No, she's probably in a treatment room, she just OD'd..." The lady shook her head. They didn't have a room for her, she had just had her stomach pumped and she was "recovering" in the waiting room. She was by herself, violently puking up a black tar-like substance into a plastic wastebasket.

First there had been fear – fear for her, fear that I might do or say something wrong – but now that fear was replaced by anger, "Could you get me a wash cloth and some water, please?" I growled, "She's just a kid and she's all alone!"

That was the gist of it, really. She was a nice, quiet, middle-class kid whose entire world had been ripped apart by abuse. She had to be really afraid. Even if she was angry, she was powerless to control anything or anyone in her life. She was completely out of her element because someone had hurt her and it must have seemed like she was being punished for it. She was suffering all of the consequences. It absolutely sucked.

So she was trying to get away, feel a little morsel of control over her ridiculously screwed up life. I figured my job now was to get her interested in staying, living... and fighting for herself, her life. It was over 25 years ago and I still remember that girl and that fear. Had she held on for another day, she would have gone to court, got some help and support, relatives were coming forward to take her out of foster care and back into the arms of family again. One more day...

Instead she ended up in the hospital psych ward for 10 days and under psychiatric care for a lot longer. She ended up nearly dead for the lack of that one day.

That girl lived through her suicide attempt and went on to be OK, just like I promised her she would – not due to my promise, you understand. Just because life is like that when people care about you and are willing to help – even if the helpers are strangers. She left me a gift, though, before I lost track of her.

She taught me that, in the greatest moment of despair, sometimes a little bit of control over their lives is all that kids need to get through just one more day. That, and one person to tell them it isn't their fault. And that they really will be OK, if they would only just let someone help – maybe even a stranger. Maybe just for one more day...

Kathleen D. Tresemer, MS
Rockton, IL

Calls for Submissions

The primary mission of Touched by Suicide, Survivors Gather (TBS,SG) is to provide a "safe harbor" for survivors who find comfort in coming together in an atmosphere of acceptance, hope and understanding.

We also, individually or as a group, engage in other activities that provide relief and enlightenment for ourselves and others. Because we know from personal experience that the aftermath of suicide can be so profound, we also seek ways to reduce the number of suicide deaths that occur.

"Suicide Prevention" is a noble banner but what does it mean and how do we keep moving forward in our efforts as a support group? For future editions of The Lighthouse we would like to share our readers' insights and ideas on suicide prevention. We ask that you address any or all of the following questions and submit your responses. In this way we can include not only an editor's essay but also contributions from many of our readers.

- What have you read recently that strikes you as helpful? A book, article, or brochure? (Provide a reference, summary review or just a quote)
- What educational program have you participated in or heard about? Where? When? What was unique about this approach to prevention?
- What organizations are you familiar with that are doing an excellent job pursuing prevention?
- Who do you know who is carrying out suicide prevention practices in a meaningful way? Briefly describe.
- What are some ideas you have for ways that TBS,SG might contribute to suicide prevention?

By addressing any or all of these questions and sharing them in this newsletter, whether you live in our service area or beyond, you will be making a worthy contribution to suicide prevention.

Bud Wiener
Editor

Datelines

NORWOOD, PA – A suicide pack by two teenage girls was carried out when they stepped in front of a speeding train.

PALO ALTO, CA – Last year four teen suicides-by-train occurred.

MANASQUAN, NJ – In 2008 two suicidal students were hit by trains within two months.

SINGAPORE – A March 21, 2010, Sunday Times article, "Call to allow assisted suicide criticized," provided readers of this Asian newspaper with an overview and critique of doctor-assisted suicide. A story in the Singapore Academy of Law Journal calling for laws allowing PAC (physician assisted suicide) has set off a debate as to the ethical and moral validity of such action.

MINNEAPOLIS – The March 24, 2010, Star Tribune carried a front page article, "A dark trend that's difficult to combat." The story reveals the growing trend of elderly residents who are taking their own lives. This trend was especially true for white males over 75 in Minnesota. In 2008 Minnesota seniors over 60 were more likely to die from suicide attempts (1 out of 2.4) than those under 60 (1 out of 13.7).



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Laura Peterson
Layout

The Suicide Support group gatherings are open to all individuals who have been touched by suicide. The group meets year round on the first Wednesday of the month 7:00 – 8:30 p.m. at Hospice of the Rock River Valley, between Dixon and Sterling at 264 Illinois Route 2, Dixon.

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Hospital Diagnosed Dementia and Suicide

Advancing age is one factor associated with increased risk of suicide. Also, dementia and Alzheimer's disease in older adults is sometimes associated with depression and may contribute to suicidal thoughts and actions.

A cumulative body of literature and research findings has been the outcome of a growing awareness and need to better understand the dynamics involved and to determine preventable measures for older persons with dementia. The results of one study, reported in 2008, examined the risk of suicide in older persons diagnosed with dementia. This investigation examined 11 years of records of individuals aged 50+ living in Denmark who were hospitalized with diagnosed dementia. Some 2½ million case files were used in the study to determine the risk of suicide and its relationship to mood disorders.

Of the 136 persons who died by suicide, 38% of the men and 41% of the women died more than three years after the initial diagnosis. It was recommended that preventive measures should focus on suicide ideation after the initial diagnosis (ideas and images related to suicide or suicidal thoughts and expressions of individuals), but also should realize that suicide can occur well after initial diagnosis.

Reported in: American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry, Vol. 16 No. 3, March, 2008, pp. 220-228.

Note: Sue Sklar, Alzheimer's Association, Greater Illinois Chapter, Rockford, provided abstracts and reviews related to suicide and Alzheimer and dementia.

The Lighthouse is published quarterly at no charge. We welcome submission of news items, poems, reviews, and personal stories. Comments and suggestions to the editor are appreciated.

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