



Son's suicide leads Tammy Richardson to outreach

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It's a sound that Tammy Richardson will never forget.

She knows that her memories of the May evening when she found her 15-year-old son Sam hanging from his bedroom ceiling will always be with her.

That she screamed, and that the phone she was holding flew out of her hand.

That she ran over to try and hold him up to take the weight off his neck.

That she grabbed a butcher's knife and hacked away at the noose until it finally gave way.

But it was the sound, the sickening thud, of Sam hitting the ground as his legs crumpled up beneath him that plays over and over in her head, all the time.

It was in that moment that Richardson knew that her son was gone.

The firefighters arrived first and took over CPR, and then, paramedics loaded Sam's body into an ambulance and rushed him to the hospital.

But it was far too late.

"To this day, I can't believe that this happened to my son," said Richardson. "It's the toughest thing I've ever dealt with in my 52 years. Nothing will ever match it, ever."

More than a year has passed since her son's suicide, and there are still times when Richardson absentmindedly glances at the door, wondering when he's going to be coming home.

Some days drag on forever, and she sometimes finds herself spending all afternoon lying in Sam's bedroom, looking at the posters that his high school classmates made for him after he died.

But she sees Sam in the face of her grandson Gauge, and taking care of the 2-year old, which she does every day while her 26-year-old daughter is at work, is the best distraction she can ask for.

As time has passed, Richardson has grown stronger. She speaks of her son's death with tremendous melancholy but doesn't lose her composure.

And now, she's ready to help teens who are struggling with suicidal thoughts, in the hopes of preventing other families from enduring what hers has gone through over the past year.

"I just want teenagers to know that suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem and that there is hope in the end," said Richardson, of North Rose, Wayne County.

She's since started a chapter of Yellow Ribbon, a national suicide prevention program, in the hopes of spreading awareness.

Prevention

The route that Richardson has taken to the field of suicide prevention is one that is shared by many of the field's local leaders. Still a taboo subject for most who haven't been personally affected, suicide — and suicide prevention — isn't something that people just wander into.

Renae Carapella started volunteering with the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention in July 2006, about 10 months after her younger brother Raymond took his own life.

"I was far enough along in my grief where I just wanted to be involved. Back then, it was about coping," said Carapella, 27, of Brockport. "Now, it's definitely transitioned into my career, my lifelong passion. And it's a way to really honor and remember Raymond."

In September 2007, a grant came through that created a full-time area director position for the western New York chapter of AFSP. Carapella has held the position ever since, and spends her days traveling the chapter's 19-county region, administering suicide prevention training and facilitating

support groups to help surviving families cope with the loss of their loved ones.

It feels like an uphill battle at times. While she works with a number of volunteers, Carapella knows that she holds one of the only paid full-time positions devoted solely to suicide prevention in all of New York state, and thinks that more government money should be spent to combat the problem.

But she continues to do her part because she feels that, somewhere down the line, things will improve for those who are struggling.

"We have to have hope that things are going to get better, that we're going to get to a point where people talk about depression like they do cancer," said Carapella. "People have to be able to go to the doctor and not feel embarrassed."

Reducing the stigma

Ninety percent of people who take their own lives have some form of diagnosable mental illness, said Eric Weaver, chairman of Carapella's chapter of AFSP and founder of local suicide prevention group Overcoming the Darkness.

But many of those deaths are people who were never officially diagnosed by a mental health professional. So while admitting that something is wrong is the first step to getting help, many people don't even get that far.

Weaver knows from experience.

He was a sergeant in the Rochester Police Department and was first hospitalized for depression and suicidal thoughts in 1995. For a while, he was reluctant to tell any colleagues in the department, most of whom only knew him as a macho, bodybuilding officer on the RPD's Emergency Task Force — what other departments call a SWAT team.

But after being in and out of the hospital for a year, Weaver finally came clean with his illness and was instrumental in establishing RPD's Emotionally Disturbed Persons Response Team, a group of officers who are trained to respond to those who are mentally ill.

He's since established two more teams in Troy and Binghamton, and many of the seminars he gives center on openness about mental illness.

"Say the word 'suicide.' Say the words 'mental illness,'" said Weaver. "One of your greatest gifts is to be able to explain what your own illness is."

Reducing the stigma that surrounds the topic would also help surviving families to cope with the aftermath of a suicide.

"I think that the worst thing about suicide is that everyone tries to keep it hush-hush," said Sam Richardson's sister, Jessica, 26, of Sodus. "I see people in the store that have known me since I was a baby, and they just walk away. They don't know how to talk about it."

Yellow Ribbon

Tammy Richardson agrees that discussion is the key to prevention.

She knew that her son was depressed. On Christmas Eve 2008, her estranged husband — Sam's father — had taken his own life. The family hadn't seen much of the man for three years, but the experience was extremely traumatic for Sam. After his father's death, he entered therapy and was out of school for three months. He displayed a number of depressive tendencies and often lost his appetite for days at a time.

But in the weeks before his death, Richardson wasn't aware of the most acute and telling signs of her son's intentions.

At school, Sam had been giving his stuff away. He'd been writing "goodbye" notes on desks. He'd even confided in a friend that he'd recently made an attempt to take his own life.

Sam's friends, who have continued to visit with Richardson regularly over the past 14 months, told her these things after he died. And while Richardson said that she's never blamed any of them for not telling an adult about Sam's warning signs, she does think the experience shows that many students don't know how to respond if they see a classmate who is displaying suicidal tendencies.

Now, her goal is to get into every middle school and high school in Wayne County, where she can speak to teens about what to do if they see a

troubled classmate. She'll also distribute Yellow Ribbon "lifeline" cards, which students can hand to a friend or adult if they're in need of help.

She's starting in her son's school system at North Rose-Wolcott, where she recently met with John Walker, who is one month into his tenure as superintendent of the district.

Walker also has had a recent brush with teen suicide. Formerly the principal of Webster Thomas High School, Walker saw the anguish that followed after three teenagers in the Webster school district took their own lives over the course of the last school year.

"Has it given me a different perspective? No. Every principal in every district is well aware that it's a problem. But has it put it on a more personal radar screen? Absolutely," said Walker. "It's heightened the sense that you've got to keep pounding the pavement and looking at programs like Yellow Ribbon."

Walker and Richardson made plans to headquarter her Yellow Ribbon program out of North Rose-Wolcott High School in the fall.

Richardson knows that she might not be received as well in other districts, but between her family and North Rose-Wolcott, she knows she has a strong support system in place.

"Suicide seems to be quite the taboo subject in schools," said Richardson. "I know I'm going to have an uphill battle, but now I'm ready to do it."

RESOURCES

24-hour help

- The Rochester Community Mobile Crisis Team provides immediate, 24-hour intervention for individuals and families experiencing a mental health crisis and can be reached at (585) 275-5151.
- The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline can be called 24 hours a day at (800) 273-8255 or online at www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org.

Local resources and support groups

- The North Rose chapter of Yellow Ribbon provides teen suicide prevention resources to local schools and universities. To reach Tammy Richardson, call (315) 573-9958 or e-mail here4u83093@aim.com.
- The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention's Western New York Chapter provides outreach to those who have lost a loved one to suicide, as well as educational programs and trainings. Renae Carapella can be reached by calling (585) 202-2783 or e-mailing rcarapella@afsp.org.
- Overcoming the Darkness provides law enforcement and emergency services training and community services and events. For more information, go to www.overcomingthedarkness.com, and to reach Eric Weaver, call (585) 410-5544.
- The After Suicide Support Group meets at 3399 S. Winton Road in Henrietta at 7:30 p.m. on the second and fourth Tuesday of every month. There is no charge to attend. For more information, call (585) 265-0449.
- The Healing After Suicide Support Group meets at 3111 S. Winton Road in Henrietta at 6:30 p.m. on the first and third Tuesday of every month. There is no charge to attend. For more information, call (585) 202-2783.