

Suicide: Overcoming the darkness

Family and friends of Thomas Kane speak out

By Julie Sherwood, staff writer

Messenger Post

Posted May 02, 2010 @ 09:11 AM

Canandaigua, N.Y. —

Dan O'Brien knew his best friend, Thomas Kane, struggled with depression. But it wasn't until after Thomas took his own life on May 5, 2009, that O'Brien realized the extent of it.

"Suicide is a very secretive thing," said O'Brien, a Finger Lakes Community College student who graduated last year from Canandaigua Academy. He and Thomas were to graduate together in the class of 2009. They became friends in second grade.

"We brought out the best in each other," said O'Brien. "He was a joker, good at making people laugh. He would do anything for you. He was a great friend."

O'Brien has shared the shock and sadness of Thomas' death with many. Friends, family, those at the academy and from their church, St. Mary's in Canandaigua, pulled together in their grief. "We could lean on each other," said O'Brien.

But the stigma attached to suicide, misunderstanding about mental illness and the circumstances of Thomas' death all contributed to making the tragedy that rocked the community particularly difficult.

Thomas was 17 when he shot himself in a school restroom.

"I miss him. I think of him every single day," said Thomas' father, Paul Kane. "People say, 'I don't know how you do it,' and that's true."

The 'no casserole illness'

When people hear the words "mental illness," they often think of words like "crazy" or "nuts," said Eric Weaver, Executive Pastor of Crosswinds Wesleyan

Church in Canandaigua.

Weaver is a former police sergeant with extensive training and background in treating mental illness. His work involves seminars and counseling individuals and families on mental health, stress, stigmas, depression, suicide prevention and awareness. He has a mental illness himself and has been hospitalized seven times for planning suicide.

Although one out of every five people in the United States deals with some kind of mental health-related issue each year, the stigmas surrounding the subject of mental health continue to do much damage, he said.

Sometimes people say hurtful things, or they don't say anything at all, said Weaver, whose Web site — www.overcomingthedarkness.com — seeks to educate and raise awareness.

Suicide and mental illness “are whispered about, kept hush-hush,” said Weaver. It is often referred to as the “no casserole illness,” he said. Simply put, when a family experiences the death of a loved one to suicide or other traumas related to mental illness, they rarely receive the support associated with physical ailments or losing a loved one to an accident or natural causes.

“Loss to suicide is devastating to a family,” he said. “Families deal for years with guilt and blaming themselves.” They need empathy and concern from others, he said, rather than being expected to come up with answers.

‘A horrible reality’

Mary Kane, Thomas’ mother, never knew how many people in her own community had experienced suicide of a loved one until after she lost Thomas. The prevalence of suicide is “a horrible reality,” said Mary, who has developed strong bonds with others who have been through it.

“Once people know it’s suicide, you find out dozens of people you know have suffered it,” said Thomas’ sister, Ruth McDonald. People tend not to talk about it — but when you open up about it, they do, too, she said.

Sixty percent of Americans will know someone who died by suicide; and for 20 percent of those Americans, it will be someone in their family. Suicide is the fourth leading cause of death for adults between the ages of 18 and 65 in the United States. Among young adults ages 15 to 24, it is considered the third leading cause of death, according to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

The death by suicide of two Webster-Schroeder High School students earlier this year is one of the latest such tragedies.

‘Overcoming the darkness’

With the anniversary of her brother’s suicide approaching, Ruth McDonald said she wanted to do something positive to take focus off the grief. She and her family launched a Web site, jaxgreatdatesweepstakes.org. All proceeds from the Jacksonville Great Date Sweepstakes to win dates at Florida attractions go to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

McDonald, an attorney who lives in Jacksonville, said her brother loved the area and had planned to attend college in Jacksonville.

In Canandaigua, programs and counseling at the academy continue to help staff and students deal with Thomas’ death and raise awareness about suicide and mental illness.

“The Kane family is a very private family,” said O’Brien. Despite what they have been through, he said, they are working to elicit something positive from their grief and help others.

St. Mary’s Church has a healing/prayer service planned for May 5. It will focus on dealing with Thomas’ death as well as the grief felt for others. This summer, the planting of a magnolia tree at St. Mary’s Church in memory of Thomas is planned for near the Yellow House, where the youth group Thomas enjoyed so much meets.

Mary Kane, who now lives in Florida, said her faith and the support from family and friends, including Thomas’ peers, brings her comfort. The grief she feels is for missing Thomas, she said; the comfort is in knowing he is safe with God.

“It’s important to not be alone,” said O’Brien. The death of his best friend has made him passionate about raising awareness and doing what he can to reduce the number of lives lost to suicide, he said. Despite misunderstandings and sometimes hearing hurtful remarks, he said, it’s important to try to help others.

“You have to do the right thing,” he said.

Copyright 2010 MPNnow. Some rights reserved