

Seeds OF Hope

Tulare & Kings Counties
SUICIDE PREVENTION
Task Force
www.sptf.org

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Hope n the Horizon

Community education and engagement are the keys to preventing suicide deaths by Shannon Springmeyer

Sometimes a connection to the right kind of support can mean the difference between life and death.

Representing a unique collaborative effort between the two counties, the Tulare & Kings Counties Suicide Prevention Task Force aims to provide such a connection to those struggling with thoughts of suicide and the people concerned for them, as well as support for survivors of suicide loss.

“The general standpoint that we take is that an informed community will be more effective in saving lives than a small, highly trained team,” says Noah Whitaker, Tulare & Kings Counties Suicide Prevention Task Force Coordinator. “So the more we can educate the community and interweave resources, the better that we can protect people who are at risk.”

The community outreach efforts offered by the task force are vibrant and varied, including music CDs, comic books and numerous trainings. In addition to raising awareness, the task force works to improve surveillance for suicide risk and implement effective programs. Two such programs benefit area youth. RESTATE provides funding and resources to teachers to educate local high school students about mental health issues through media arts. Sprigeo is an anonymous online bullying reporting system available free of charge to all schools within Tulare and Kings counties.

“Everything that we touch or that we’re a part of or that we do is full of hope and life, while honoring the importance and value in those lives that have been lost,” says Jackie Jones Siegenthaler, co-coordinator of the task force for Kings County.

All programs and trainings are offered to the public completely free. The task force receives funding for all its efforts from California Proposition 63, the Mental Health Services Act.

One major effort centered on raising awareness is the task force’s annual Festival of Hope. The festival draws thousands and aims to educate the community and provide links to services in a fun and engaging way. The event includes two days of live music and performances, colorful and inspiring street murals created by members of the community and a wealth of resources for supportive services.

Jones Siegenthaler credits the incredible level of local community and county agency support for the success of this program and many others.

“There is nothing like the voices of your own community being heard and those shoulders carrying the weight of a movement,” she says.

Sunflowers have become an important symbol for the organization, illustrating the way hope can spread from one individual to another throughout the community.



Photo by Jacques Gross

Noah Whitaker and Jackie Jones Siegenthaler are coordinators for the Tulare & Kings Counties Suicide Prevention Task Force, dedicated to saving lives and providing support in the communities they serve.

“Sunflowers have this beautiful essence to them in which one seed can become a plant that produces hundreds of seeds,” Noah Whitaker explains. “Those hundreds of seeds can be further nurtured and planted to produce thousands upon thousands of flowers ... By helping and nurturing a single flower into seed, it could help an entire community.”

Sunflowers appear on many Tulare & Kings Counties Suicide Prevention Task Force materials, such as a sunflower seed packet printed with the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline phone number. Whitaker was told the story of how one such packet worked its way through the community from a school teacher to a student to the student’s sister, ultimately

making its way to a coworker the sister had been concerned about. Upon receiving the seed packet, the coworker broke into tears, admitting he had made plans to take his own life that very night. The man was immediately linked with support and survives to this day. This incident illustrates exactly the power of the community network that the sunflower itself represents, Whitaker says.

“That’s really the core of how our efforts work,” he says. “The individuals in our community can be compassionate, can be caring, can be knowledgeable, and they themselves can save that life that’s at risk. Our central theme is always that there is hope.”

TULARE & KINGS COUNTIES SUICIDE PREVENTION TASK FORCE VOTING MEMBERS



- | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|
| ◆ Co-Chair (Community)
Cheryl Lennon-Armas, LMFT | ◆ HHSA Mental Health Branch
Timothy Durick, Psy.D. | ◆ Kings County — Survivor of Loss
Deb West | ◆ Mental Health Services Consumers & Family Members
Denise Nelson |
| ◆ Co-Chair (Agency)
Mary Anne Ford Sherman | ◆ HHSA Health Branch
Karen Haught, M.D., M.P.H. | ◆ Kings/Tulare Area Agency on Aging
Laura Silva | ◆ Survivors of Suicide & Loss
Carla Sawyer, PHN |
| ◆ Education
Ben Dhillon | ◆ Kings County — Education
Karen McConnell | ◆ Law Enforcement
Sgt. Tom Wright, M.S. | ◆ Tulare County Medical Society
Kathryn Hall, M.D. |
| ◆ Faith-based Organizations
Harvey Torgeson | ◆ Kings County — Family Member
Ken Baird | ◆ LGBTQ
William VanLandingham, MSCE | ◆ Veterans
Tom Donwen, AMVETS Post 56 |
| ◆ HHSA Human Services Branch
Darcy Massey, LCSW | ◆ Kings County — Kings View
Brenda Johnson-Hill, LMFT | ◆ Media
Paul Hurley | ◆ Youth / Young Adults / TAY
Mercedes Adams |
| | ◆ Kings County — Law Enforcement
Tom Edmunds | | |

Finding Strength in Community

Teen organizes Walk of Hope

by Shannon Springmeyer

Chelsea West, 17, is today about the same age as her brother Jeff was when he died by suicide. Though she was only 3 at the time and doesn't remember much about the immediate experience of his death, the pain and loss experienced by her family fuel her work to raise awareness about suicide. She hopes her efforts can prevent such deaths and provide healing for survivors of suicide loss.

Chelsea believes many teens, like her brother, are in need of someone to talk to.

"Especially for teens, this is a critical time in our life to be learning who we are and what we want to be," she says. "[Teens] need to know they're not alone."

"There's a whole community out there that wants to help you, that's willing and able to."

Chelsea West,
organizer of Walk of Hope

Her brother took his life after breaking both his arms in a car accident, forcing him to give up participating in Jiu-Jitsu martial arts, which he loved. He entered a depression, the extent of which was not immediately evident to her family, she says. Chelsea realizes the suicide death of her

brother is no one's fault, but she wishes her family had been better informed about recognizing the warning signs and her brother better equipped with ways to reach out.

That's why, when tasked with creating a project to earn her Gold Award for Girl Scouts, Chelsea knew that suicide prevention awareness would be her cause. In 2011, she proposed her idea for the Walk of Hope to the Tulare & Kings Counties Suicide Prevention Task Force. Noah Whitaker, coordinator for the task force, became her project adviser. The task force embraced Chelsea's idea and helped her incorporate it into their annual Festival of Hope weekend of events.

The first Walk of Hope was held on Oct. 6, 2012. The event kicked off with speakers and included a community walk through Tulare County's Del Lago Park and a remembrance wall commemorating loved ones lost to suicide with letters and photographs. An estimated 400 to 600 people turned out for the event, and the Walk of Hope has now become an annual feature.

Chelsea also utilizes the notoriety that comes from her involvement in the Miss America pageants as a platform for suicide prevention, speaking on the issue during competitions and pageant events.

Chelsea hopes such efforts help people understand that "there's a whole community out there that wants to help you, that's willing and able to."



Photo by Jacques Gross

Chelsea West uses her own experience of loss and her involvement in Girl Scouts and the Miss America pageants to help raise awareness for suicide prevention.

Noah Whitaker also notes that there are many resources for those who have survived a suicide loss, such as the monthly survivor support group. Support that facilitates open communication about suicide and loss can offer a tremendous comfort, he says.

"I can say, having lost both my father and grandfather to suicide, there is a special kinship, where [participants] just sort of realize that the pain that they feel isn't just their burden only, that there are others who share that pain," Whitaker says.

Both Chelsea West's and Noah Whitaker's efforts through the Tulare & Kings Counties Suicide Prevention Task Force seek to help others see that though losing a loved one is hard, there is hope and help available by reaching out to the community.

RESOURCES FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION AND SURVIVORS OF SUICIDE LOSS

- ◆ **FESTIVAL OF HOPE AND WALK OF HOPE:** Annual events of the Tulare and Kings Counties Suicide Prevention Task Force. The events focus on fun, community engagement, remembrance, education, resources and, above all, hope. Visit www.sptf.org for more information.
- ◆ **SURVIVOR SUPPORT GROUP:** The Tulare County Survivors of Suicide Loss peer support group is open to anyone who has lost someone to suicide and is free of charge. The group meets the third Thursday of each month at 210 W. Center Ave. in Visalia from 6:30 to 8 p.m.

- ◆ **GRIEF AND BEREAVEMENT COUNSELING:** Individuals who work or live in either Kings or Tulare County who are immediately impacted by a suicide loss can receive counseling at absolutely no cost. Individuals will be referred to a participating clinician for 6 to 8 sessions of counseling. For more information, call 559-624-7471, email sptf@tularehhsa.org, or visit www.sptf.org/english/index.cfm/programs/grief-berereavement-counseling.
- ◆ **LOSS TEAM:** This innovative program dispatches team members to support the loved ones of a person who has died from suspected suicide. Team members have themselves experienced loss due to suicide and can help let those grieving know that they are not alone and direct them toward information and services. For more information, visit www.sptf.org/english/index.cfm/programs/loss-team.

A Helping Hand

Man inspired by loss to help LGBTQ youth in need

by Mike Blount

William “Van” VanLandingham shares his story to help prevent suicide in LGBTQ youth.

When William “Van” VanLandingham was 17 years old, he lost his best friend to suicide. It had a profound effect on VanLandingham who, like his friend, was struggling with how to reveal his sexual orientation to his friends and family. From that moment, VanLandingham vowed to help other lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth in crisis so their friends and loved ones would never have to experience loss like he did.

“At the time, I had not come out, and [my friend] was the only person I knew in the community who was gay,” VanLandingham says. “It was frightening that that might happen to me. It made me want to reach out and help others so they don’t go past the crisis to thoughts of suicide.”

VanLandingham began working as a crisis line worker shortly thereafter, learning how to listen and counsel people in fragile mental states. But it was through his involvement with The Trevor Project as a lifeguard/facilitator that VanLandingham realized his

potential.

The Trevor Project was founded in 1998 by James Lecesne, Peggy Rajske and Randy Stone — the creators of an Academy Award-winning short film, “Trevor.” The film depicts a young boy, Trevor, who develops feelings for another boy in his class. After his classmates discover this, they tease and mock Trevor, which ultimately results in an attempt to end his life.

HBO scheduled to air the film, but the filmmakers realized there was no organization that provided the type of crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to LGBTQ youth that might have saved Trevor’s life. The Trevor Project became the first organization in the United States to offer these services to LGBTQ youth, as well as heterosexual youth in crisis.

“We target the LGBTQ community, but we are inclusive of everyone,” VanLandingham says. “Working with The Trevor Project has connected me to so many other people all around that are concerned and willing to help. A lot of us have gone through the same

kind of situation with being bullied or teased, or feeling sad. I just wish an organization like this had been there when I was younger.”

Part of VanLandingham’s job takes him into the community to raise awareness of the help that is available. He says that even though there are more resources than ever, teens often don’t realize they are there. VanLandingham says he shares his story on school campuses, health fairs, job fairs and anywhere he can speak to let people know they are not alone and that there is help available. He believes this is one of the best tools for crisis intervention and suicide prevention.

At one of those events, VanLandingham says a young man approached him to tell him his story. “He came up to me and said, ‘I’m here because of Trevor,’” VanLandingham says. “He was able to get out of depression and his parents became supportive of him after his mother overheard a phone call he made to our crisis line. It made me cry because we changed his life.”

RESOURCES FOR LGBTQ YOUTH



- ◆ **GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCE:** A national youth leadership organization that connects school-based Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) to each other and community resources through peer support, leadership development and training. For more information, visit gsanetwork.org, email info@gsanetwork.org or call 415-552-4229.
- ◆ **PARENTS, FAMILIES AND FRIENDS OF LESBIANS AND GAYS:** PFLAG is a national nonprofit organization made up of parents, families, friends and straight allies uniting with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) people to advance equality through its mission of support, education and advocacy. For more information, email chapterservices@pflag.org, call 202-467-8180 ext. 210, or visit www.pflag.org to find your local chapter.
- ◆ **THE TREVOR PROJECT:** The Trevor Project is a leading national organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to LGBTQ youth. For more information, visit www.thetrevorproject.org or call the crisis line at 1-866-488-7386.

The War Within

Richard Cruz found a better way to cope with life after deployment

by Michelle Carl

It was dark outside, 5 a.m., and Richard Cruz was patrolling Joint Base Balad, an M-16 close at his side. Off in the distance, speakers crackled with the call for morning prayer during Ramadan.

That's when he knew he was in another world.

"To me it was a little creepy because you see things on the news, and then you're actually in it," the 26-year-old says of being deployed to Iraq in September 2009.

U.S. Air Force Airman Cruz worked security at the base, 70 miles outside of Baghdad. He recalls his first day on base working the vehicle checkpoint and having to draw his weapon on someone who didn't comply with orders. Bombings were common, and although he wasn't there long, being on constant high alert was stressful. Every day started to feel the same.

"It doesn't have to end like that. You can make it end how you want it to end."

Richard Cruz

"That was a scary thing, getting used to what you were doing and where you were at," he says. "There were times where it felt like you were never going to come home."

Once he came back to the U.S. in January 2010, he struggled with anxiety and depression. He turned to old addictions and some new ones to cope: alcohol, opiates and "spice" — a synthetic form of marijuana.

"I was out of my own mind a lot," Richard recalls. "I couldn't respond normally to situations or to people."

That first year he was back, a close friend died in a car accident and his nephew was shot dead. He struggled with the losses. Friends and family would offer kind words or advice — *I love you, I'm praying for you, Just straighten up and fly right.*

"A big part of it was people didn't understand," he says. "Part of it was I wouldn't let them

understand and part of it was they weren't asking the right questions."

Richard had overdosed on prescription drugs twice when he was in the service. He was hospitalized but never shared his drug addiction or mental health issues out of fear of being discharged. And now, not able to climb out of a box that got stronger the more he tried to escape it, Richard again started thinking about ending his life.

"I contemplated it for about a month, came up with a plan," he says. "I thought either someone will be able to help me or I'm just going to go through with it. ... If no one picks up when I call, then I'll take that as a sign that I might as well."

But someone picked up the phone. Richard called his aunt, who got him a ride to the Veterans Affairs office in Fresno.

There, Richard signed up for a dual diagnosis program, which addresses substance abuse and mental health issues. Richard says it's giving him the tools to heal.

Jerry Silva, Suicide Prevention Coordinator at the Fresno VA, says the soldier mentality often leads to service members trying to deal with their problems alone.

"They tend to think, 'Let me pull myself up by my bootstraps,' and that is a barrier to reaching out for assistance," he says. "But we say it takes more strength to reach out and get help."

Silva is pleased to have seen the remarkable progress Richard has made.

"The best day was when he gave me a big old hug and thanked me. That made the whole thing worthwhile, to see that look in his eye and the hope that has been restored," Silva says. "I told him, 'You're the one doing it. Give yourself credit.'"

Richard plans on going back to school to get his English degree. He wants to make music and write, maybe even start a comic book. He hopes other veterans who struggled like he did find the help they deserve.

"You did your time, you did your service. Keep pushing and eventually you will get [help]," he says. "It doesn't have to end like that. You can make it end how you want it to end."



Photo by Jacques Gross

Veteran Richard Cruz found help to treat his addiction and mental illness.

RESOURCES FOR VETERANS



◆ VETERANS/ACTIVE DUTY PERSONNEL CRISIS LINE:

The Veterans Crisis Line connects veterans in crisis and their families and friends with qualified, caring Department of Veterans Affairs responders through a confidential toll-free hotline, online chat, or text. Phone: 1-800-273-8255, press 1, or chat confidentially online at www.veteranscrisisline.net, or text 838255

◆ AMVETS STATE DEPARTMENT HEADQUARTERS:

AMVETS offers suicide prevention and also many other resources for veterans facing any kind of problem. Phone: 559-688-3407, website: www.calamvets.org

◆ VETERANS AFFAIRS:

The Veterans Affairs office has a Suicide Prevention Coordinator available. The VA can set up doctor appointments and refer veterans into programs to help deal with mental health issues. Jerry Silva, Suicide Prevention Coordinator at Fresno VA Hospital, Phone: 559-225-6100 ext. 5935, website: www.fresno.va.gov

◆ KINGS COUNTY VETERANS SUPPORT GROUP:

Offering information, resources and discussion of combat-related symptoms such as PTSD, depression and relationship issues. Phone: 559-852-2372

◆ KINGS COUNTY PUBLIC GUARDIAN VETERANS

SERVICES OFFICER: Joe Wright. Phone: 559-852-2659

Warning Signs of Suicide

1. Preoccupation with suicide or death.
2. Depression or loss of interest in activities once enjoyed.
3. Explosions of rage or anger.
4. Reckless behavior, such as driving too fast or excessive spending.
5. Displaying feelings of hopelessness, helplessness or unworthiness. Saying things like, "Life's not worth living," or, "It would be better if I just wasn't here."
6. Dramatic mood swings or changes in personality.
7. Increased drug or alcohol use.
8. Making changes to one's will, giving away prized possessions or a preoccupation with setting up plans "just in case."
9. Looking for drugs, firearms or any other means of self-harm.
10. Visiting or calling friends to say goodbye.

... And what to do if you recognize them

by **Natasha von Kaenel**

Often, people who are struggling with thoughts of suicide feel isolated from their friends and loved ones. It is difficult for them to start a conversation about what they are going through. If you have noticed any of these signs in someone you know, sit down together and follow these steps to talk about it.

Express your concern. Make sure to let the person you are concerned about talk, and listen to what he or she says. Sometimes it just takes someone to listen, and you should emphasize that you understand where the person is coming from and validate his or her feelings.

Ask the person directly if he or she has had suicidal thoughts or intentions. You will not put the idea into the person's head. If the person is considering suicide, getting it out in the open will help him or her feel more comfortable discussing it with you. Do not ask about suicide in a way that might elicit an automatic denial, such as, "You are not going to do something stupid and kill yourself, right?" Do not make fun of the person's reasons, tell him or

her to get over it or argue about what the person is feeling.

Determine access to drugs or weapons. Ask if the person you are concerned about has access to any weapons, medications or other potentially dangerous items and dispose of them. It may be necessary to request help from a friend, and if at any point you feel like you are in danger, call 9-1-1 immediately.

Ask the person to stop self-medicating. If the person is abusing drugs or alcohol, explain that this will only make negative feelings worse. Ask the person to stop using or agree to have someone monitor his or her use until a meeting with a medical professional can be arranged.

Provide resources for help. Go over what to do the next time the person has thoughts of suicide. Can the person call you or someone you know to talk about his or her feelings? Ask if he or she is willing to talk with a medical professional, and provide the information of local resources and the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 1-800-273-TALK.

GET INVOLVED IN MAKING HOPE HAPPEN!



The Tulare and Kings Counties Suicide Prevention Task Force is open to anyone in the community and we would love to have you join our efforts. For a schedule of our meetings, please visit our calendar at www.sptf.org.

The task force provides access to free training, such as Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) and Mental Health First Aid (MHFA), and can offer education sessions to service clubs, faith organizations, job sites, and groups at no charge.

Email sptf@tularehhsa.org, call 559-624-7471, or inquire at www.facebook.com/hope.sptf.

SUICIDE PREVENTION RESOURCES

TULARE AND KINGS COUNTIES SUICIDE PREVENTION TASK FORCE

www.sptf.org

www.facebook.com/hope.sptf

Email: sptf@tularehhsa.org

Tulare County: Noah Whitaker, call 559-624-7471

Kings County: Jackie Jones Siegenthaler,
call 559-582-3211 ext. 2381

TULARE COUNTY HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES AGENCY

www.tchhsa.org

Mental Health Crisis Line: 1-800-320-1616

For deaf or hearing impaired: 1-800-735-2929

KINGS COUNTY BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

www.kingscountybehavioralhealth.com

Emergency/Crisis Mental Health Services: 1-800-655-2553 OR
559-582-4484

NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE

1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)

www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

THE TREVOR PROJECT

1-866-488-7386

www.thetrevorproject.org

THE SUICIDE PREVENTION RESOURCE CENTER

www.sprc.org

1-877-GET-SPRC (1-877-438-7772)

TTY: 617-964-5448

THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SUICIDOLOGY

www.suicidology.org

202-237-2280