

*INSIDE  
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ISSUE*

## When Tragedy Strikes: Suicide Postvention on a College Campus

**Sally Spencer Thomas**

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In his rural high school, David had it all – valedictorian, president of his class, and a varsity starter for the basketball team. When a good friend and team-mate of his took his life, David’s world assumptions were shattered, and he found himself spending much of his summer drinking with the other members of the team as they tried to cope with the loss.

When college started in the fall, he moved to another state to attend a big urban college, and he left his friends behind. He struggled with his classes and felt very isolated and lonely despite being surrounded by lots of people. By mid-semester, he received a report card of failing grades and got a strong reprimand from his father who feared David would lose his scholarship.

On the day before David was supposed to go home for the holidays, he killed himself by hanging in his dormitory bedroom. Crisis and chaos ensued as emergency personnel removed his body from the room in front of dozens of hysterical on-lookers. A shrine of cards and flowers appeared the next day at the door of his room, as distraught students bid him farewell and headed home for the holidays. When students returned to campus the next month, the headline of the school paper had a front page article with the headline, “*Student Commits Suicide in Main Hall.*” As many students knew of the circumstances of David’s death, the school chose to vacate his room and turn it into a library. The campus was fearful that other students might mimic this act, so they chose not to publicly acknowledge the death. Five years later, students coming to campus asked why in the midst of a housing shortage, was one of the potential dormitory rooms an unneeded library; the trauma of David’s suicide continued.

The above story illustrates many of the challenges facing college campuses today as they try to simultaneously promote suicide prevention and prepare for the worst. In the United States, my campus is one of over 100 college campuses that have received federal funding from the Garrett Lee Smith Campus Suicide Prevention Act to develop comprehensive suicide prevention programs. I have noticed that all of them are focused on prevention and intervention, but few have really addressed the concerns of postvention. Those of us in the field of suicide postvention know that it is a critical piece of the prevention picture. The purpose of this article is to raise questions and provide some answers on how our campuses might be better prepared to manage the crisis in the aftermath of a student suicide.

### **Crisis Communication**

The general principles for crisis communication that exist for other types of campus community disasters apply to the response to a campus suicide. First, contact needs to be made with the family regarding their wishes for communication in the aftermath of a suicide. Some family members may not feel comfortable sharing the cause of death, and while Universities should respectfully comply with the family’s desires, they should also counsel families that death certificates are public records and that by not being candid about the cause of death they may inadvertently cause complications for bereaved students and others. Second, a spokesperson needs to be identified to be the main point of communication for concerned campus members and their families as well as the media. This person needs to know as much about the situation as possible so he or she can communicate clearly and factually with the internal and external communities.

Factual briefs to the community (no more than one page) that state the basic information of who, when, where, and what happened (although reporting the specific means of death is not advised) and an information number to call can help the community get the information needed to dispel rumours that may encourage additional trauma. These informational briefs can also contain the information about memorial services and the family’s wishes (e.g., where letters can be sent, if a donation drive is being set up in the deceased’s memory, etc.).

In addition, leadership that is visible and compassionate during this time can help calm the fears and clarify the issues for the community. Senior administrators who respond verbally or in writing to this type of tragedy need to walk the fine line between honouring the life of the student that was lost while emphasizing the implications of such a tragedy and the importance of prevention.

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### **Safe Messaging and Contagion**

Sometimes the first time students hear about a campus suicide is via the student newspaper, and this can be a very traumatic and sometimes unsafe way to disseminate this tragic news. While high school communities have more control over their messaging strategies, colleges should be equally cognizant of the risks of contagion or copy-cat suicide. Safe messaging guidelines apply to our campuses and should be observed in school media reporting, memorials, and letters or briefs from school officials. According to the Suicide Prevention Resource Centre safe message strategies:

- emphasize the complexity of suicide and the importance of help-seeking
- explain warning signs, protective and risk factors and resources for help
- do not glamorise or romanticise suicide
- do not disclose extensive and disturbing detail about the means of the death
- do not present suicide as a common event, but a tragedy that can be prevented

### **Memorialization**

Campuses dealing with the aftermath of suicide are often at a loss for how to deal with grieving students on one hand and the fear of copycat suicides on the other. One of the questions campuses should ask themselves is, “how might we handle other types of tragic student deaths?” – and start from there. People often need a way to channel their grief, and if the school does not provide this for them, they will do it on their own, often in unsafe ways such as substance abuse or by creating public shrines that can glorify the death. Rather, campuses can find ways to let the students express their grief without causing risk.

- A memorial or candle-lighting service that follows the safe messaging suggestions above and provides counseling resources in the aftermath, can help grieving students get closure and connect to help
- Students can write letters or create a photo album of memories to give to the grieving family
- A donation drive can help the campus community donate to a cause that the deceased student would have supported and honour his or her life in an affirming way

### **Healing and Recovery**

While it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the complex reactions that people have in response to suicide, campuses can expect a range of emotional responses – from indifference, to anger, to devastation, to guilt. Students who are struggling can be helped in their recovery process by being able to tell their stories to compassionate listeners. Debriefing sessions sponsored by the Counselling Centre or University Ministry can help if the focus is on coping, resilience and the importance of community rather than a focus on the trauma. Students may also need referrals to community groups specifically serving those bereaved by suicide.

### **Survivors in Action**

Finally, students who have been bereaved by suicide can often become the strongest advocates for suicide prevention on a campus. Allow students who are filled with the passion of making a difference to channel this energy in constructive ways. Some of my students have gone on to be suicide prevention gatekeeper trainers, others have participated in community awareness events, one even won a state beauty pageant with suicide prevention as her platform.

In conclusion, while suicide is often a campus’ worst nightmare, those who are proactive in creating a plan for response are often much better to weather the crisis than those who find themselves reacting in the chaos. We can all hold on to the hope of recovery that Helen Keller expressed when she said, “The world is full of suffering; it is also full of the overcoming of it.”

For more information on suicide prevention, intervention and postvention on college campuses: [www.PeoplePreventSuicide.org](http://www.PeoplePreventSuicide.org)

For postvention training or more information, please feel free to contact me: [Sally@CarsonJSpencer.org](mailto:Sally@CarsonJSpencer.org)

### **About the Author**

As a psychologist and the survivor of her brother’s suicide, Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas addresses the issue of suicide prevention, intervention and postvention from many angles. Currently she is the Executive Director for the Carson J Spencer Foundation ([www.CarsonJSpencer.org](http://www.CarsonJSpencer.org)), a Colorado-based non-profit organisation that is dedicated to “sustaining a passion for life” through suicide prevention, social enterprise and support for emerging leaders. She is also the Project Director for Regis University’s Garrett Lee Smith Campus Suicide Prevention Grant and speaks on campuses across the U.S. on suicide prevention through her work with CAMPUSPEAK. Finally, she is the Survivor Division Chair for the American Association of Suicidology.

## Mark

### Bernadine's Story



Mark with his sister Mary

On the 4th March 2007, our lives would change forever. My son had taken his own life through suicide in a beautiful but lonely place. What despair had driven him to this? What was it that finally pushed him over the edge? It is one question that will never be answered.

There are many words I can use to describe the pain I felt after my sons death but none of them do it any justice. I felt guilty, despair, loneliness, hopelessness, useless and above all, this nightmare can't be happening to us, it only happens to others. When I used to lie awake at night thinking, there was always one question I would ask myself; Why I as your mother I didn't know you were suffering.

I remember contacting relatives and Mark's friends and to hear their cries of despair and to see the look of sadness on their faces only added to my anguish. Thoughts return to meeting people who have been in the same situation, who suffered the pain I was suffering and who asked the same questions I asked. Then you're thinking 'he's dead', anything I did, anytime I lifted a cup, anytime I walked to the door, anytime I went to the bathroom. Every thought was 'he's dead'. From the moment you wake up; 'he's dead' morning, noon and night.

But who was Mark? He was a young man with hopes and dreams, his aspirations were to become a stone mason and then to travel the world. However, between the ages of 15 and 18 he had a few difficult years. A few minor incidents with the Police saw him being fined €600 and doing a few weeks community service. However, he turned a corner after that.

He was employed by Tom Fox in the construction industry and he loved getting up for work in the morning. He had a great relationship with Tom. Mark was quiet in nature, generous to a fault, loved the game Texas Hold'Em and had many friends, his sister Mary being his best.

Two very vivid pictures of Mark come to mind when I think of him. The first is 3 years ago when he walked me down the aisle. What a strapping young man and I am proud to call him my son. The second is when we lived in Dublin and at the age of 3, I can see him running along Henry Street in his denim jacket, Nike runners and hat and everyone moving out of his way to admire him. Comments come to mind of "he'll break a lot of hearts" and indeed he did, the day he died.

In July 2006 his best friend Patrick died in a car accident and this hit Mark hard. He moved back home, staying up in his room a lot and he rarely went out but then you thought he was growing up. He still came across as happy-go-lucky so we never really knew what was going on in his mind.

We missed it at the time but 5 months after Mark's death and 1 day before what would have been his 23rd birthday, a note turned up under his mattress saying.

"Mary I am so sorry  
I prayed forgiveness everyday  
Sorry Mam".

People often ask do I feel anger towards my son for his sudden departure. My answer I that we love him too much. I am proud of my son, its just that he couldn't cope with life.

For a long time I wondered how would I survive but there does come a time when you learn to live with suicide.

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You learn to have hope and there will be laughter and smiles and living to be done again.

The word survive is very important because that is what happens. You learn how to survive suicide through your own willpower, the help of your family, trained counsellors, bereavement groups and our community.

Suicide is something that can no longer be brushed under the carpet, we must reach out and try to provide for the lack of out of hours services for those experiencing psychiatric trauma.

There is a very real need in communities for a dedicated coming together of individuals to remember and honour loved ones who have died so tragically.

No longer can we leave the bereaved to their lonely private grief.

We must have honest and open discussions about suicide and mental health. We must create a society that is more caring and sensitive. Societies where people seek help not shy away from it.

Part of our healing process has come about through the immense help and support of Alan Gilsean and Moira Lawson, director and researcher of "I See a Darkness" - a programme that looks behind and beyond the facts and figures of suicide in Ireland. It is a personal insight into the desperate reality of death by suicide. A reality that tragically impacts on many Irish families today.

The pain has never gone away but this programme has helped us talk about things. It has allowed us to let people know that they are not alone. That we as a nation must take on the responsibility of educating people on their mental health and let all know that you must believe in what you feel, as every feeling is right. When things look bleak, live from day-to-day but remember things will change in the future and that help is available if needed.

We're heartbroken that Mark is gone and wish he was here today, and yes I continue to cry each day for the beautiful son, brother, grandson, nephew, cousin and friend that we have lost but also for the past, present and future which he should have had.

Maybe hearing our story will help bring someone else back from the brink.

It is wiser to remember things as they were but it takes courage to accept that I was not responsible for the sudden and tragic death of my son Mark.

We all have choices after personal tragedy. Either we quit on life or go back to it. Mine is to go back and honour best the memory of Mark by living life as fully as we can, and making up for the unfinished life he so sadly missed out on.

Our journey is unknown and I carry you forever Mark.

***Bernadine Mc Donnell/Richardson who is 43 is a single parent who raised two children in Ireland in the early 80's. She also qualified as a learning disability nurse in Ireland in 2003.***

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The IASP Website has updated the postvention and suicide bereavement pages. Please look at these links:

- <http://www.iasp.info/resources/postvention/>
- <http://www.iasp.info/postvention.php>

Do you know any additional useful resources (e.g., PDF of brochures or links) or links to national suicide survivor organisations? If so, please forward same to

**[karl.andriessen@pandora.be](mailto:karl.andriessen@pandora.be)**

## Pre-Conference Event— 15th World Congress on Suicide Prevention

As a pre-conference event at the 15th World Congress on Suicide Prevention in Uruguay in October 2009, Samaritans will be presenting a day of talks around the theme of postvention.

### **Speakers include:**

#### **Associate Professor Annette Beautrais**

Principal Investigator, Canterbury Suicide Project, New Zealand

#### **Karl Andriessen**

Co-chair of the International Association of Suicide Prevention's Task Force on Postvention, Belgium

#### **Prof. Onja Grad, PhD,**

Psychotherapist, University Psychiatric Hospital and Medical School, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

#### **Prof. Jane Pirkis,**

Principal Research Fellow, Melbourne School of Population Health, Melbourne University, Australia

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## Upcoming Events

### **October 27-31, 2009:**

International Association for Suicide Prevention, 25<sup>th</sup> World Congress, Montevideo, Uruguay. [www.iasp2009.org](http://www.iasp2009.org)

### **November 21st, 2009:**

11<sup>th</sup> Annual National Survivors of Suicide Day. [www.afsp.org/survivorday](http://www.afsp.org/survivorday)

### **April 21st—24th, 2010:**

43rd Annual AAS Conference, Orlando, Florida. "Family Community Systems and Suicide".  
**Call for Papers Deadline: 15th August 2009**

### **September 1st—4th 2010:**

13th European Symposium on Suicide and Suicide Behaviour. Rome, Italy

## **Open Meeting of the IASP Postvention Taskforce**

Dear Members and Friends,

Herewith, I would like to invite you to attend the meeting of the Postvention Taskforce. Traditionally, the Taskforce holds a meeting during the IASP Congress with its members and other interested attendees, and this year's meeting will take place on October 29th in the evening from 19.15pm—20.15pm.

During this meeting, we will look at the status of the current activities, such as the Postvention Newsletter and the postvention page on the IASP website. In addition, we will plan new initiatives.

Please let me know if you consider to attend the meeting.

Please forward topics for the agenda to [karl.andriessen@pandora.be](mailto:karl.andriessen@pandora.be)

Looking forward to hearing from you,

*Karl*

Karl Andriessen, Co-Chair of the Postvention Task Force

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## **A Worldwide Survey of Suicide Survivor Services**

Dear Colleagues,

I want to organise a survey of suicide survivor services across all continents. The aim of the survey is to increase our basic knowledge of services for the bereaved by suicide; what kind of services are available, where, from who, and for whom.

During the meeting of the IASP Postvention Taskforce, to be held on the 29th of October in Montevideo, I will present the provisional plan and make a call for researchers/authors to participate in this project.

With best regards,

*Karl*

Karl Andriessen

Co-Chair of the Postvention Task Force

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