

# Reflections on Teen Suicide and How We Can Do Better

*By Greg Adams*

I look around the table at the faces of teens, tweens and young adult camp counselors. Each has had a relative, family member or friend die by suicide. Too often the person who died was a young person—a brother, sister, or close friend. We're at Camp Alex at the Ferncliff Conference Center for a camp named in honor and memory of Alex Blackwood, a 19-year-old young man lost to suicide in 2008. We've been doing this for four years with young people impacted by a loss by suicide. Familiar and new faces and most of the young adult Ferncliff counselors involved have someone they're remembering, too—trying to make sense out of deaths that defy easy or simple explanations. That's one of the “take-home” messages for the campers and all of us left behind: it's always complicated when someone dies by suicide.

Driving to a high school in Arkansas. One of their students has killed himself and the school is asking for some outside support. On the interstate, there are new barriers to keep drivers from crossing the median and causing a deadly head-on crash. Sometimes there's a billboard with a safety message about no texting and driving or a message to wear your seatbelt—“click it or ticket.” In recent years, the number of deaths in Arkansas by car crashes and the number of deaths by suicide are about the same. In 2013, a few more suicides than car crash deaths; in 2014, a few more car crash deaths than suicides (and over three times as many suicides than homicides). Where are the messages and investments to decrease the number of suicides in our state? Both types of deaths are preventable. Why does one get attention, safety messages and capital investments while the other gets mostly silence? We help our young people learn to drive and drive safely. We can also help them to recognize signs of depression and risks of suicide and teach them how to find help for both.

A phone call comes from a grieving and concerned parent. There's been a suicide in the family. Should the children be told the death was as suicide? Suicide is hard to think about and harder to discuss. But the price of avoidance is too high. When we keep secrets, trust is lost as well as the opportunity to help and support. When we

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can't talk about depression and emotional problems, we fail to connect those who are struggling with the help and support they need. Most people, at least 90 percent, of those who die by suicide were depressed or had some other diagnosable emotional problem. Finding ways to ask about depression and thoughts of suicide and getting the person to help can save lives. But not if we keep quiet and can't say the words.

In early November, join a couple thousand people who gather to walk together in downtown Little Rock. Walking to raise awareness and funds for suicide prevention. Most of us walking in memory of a dear one lost to suicide. Before we walk, there are speakers and Will McCastlain talks of his older brother's recent suicide and how we can and must make the world a safer, more supportive place. Will embodies the emotions of the crowd—heartbroken by loss, not ashamed to give suicide a name, determined to remember a life and make the world a better place for those who struggle.

Suicide is complicated in so many ways. The factors that come together are complicated in a toxic way and the feelings left for the survivors—those left behind—are certainly complicated, too. In the midst of these complications, however, there are some things we know. We know that most people who kill themselves feel overwhelmed by pain and at that moment can see no other way out. We know that it's never just one factor which causes suicide, it's always a "perfect storm" of multiple factors. We also know that the more steps we can put between someone at risk for suicide and the means of suicide—guns, pills for an overdose, etc.—the more likely the person can survive that critical moment of being suicidally desperate in pain. Finally, we know, unlike the suicidal person, that the problem of teen suicide (and suicide at any age) is not hopeless. There are practical and realistic steps we can take which can and will save lives.

On Sunday, September 26, William McCastlain and Steven, Cindi and Ariel Blackwood will receive the [2016 Marie Interfaith Civic Leadership Awards](#) for their work in suicide prevention and awareness at 2 p.m. September 25 at Temple B'Nai Israel, 3700 N. Rodney Parham Road, Little Rock. These people know the depth of pain that

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comes from losing a sibling or child to suicide. They also know that lives can be saved if we learn from the tragedies and losses of the past and that the lives of those lost were much more than the circumstances of their deaths.

The public is invited to this free educational event where a panel of the awardees and Christopher Epperson, Board Chair for the Arkansas Chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, will discuss “Teens and Young Adult Suicide Prevention – Bringing Hope.” An RSVP is requested at [www.themarie.com](http://www.themarie.com).

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