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SPOTLIGHT SURVIVORS OF SUICIDE : Group is shining light on suicide

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SPRINGDALE — An Atlanta woman new to the area recently joined the Survivors of Suicide support group that meets twice monthly at the Jones Center for Families. She shared her story with the handful of regulars over a period of several weeks, grieved and coped, then returned to Atlanta. Before leaving, she complained to facilitator Rilla Tolliver that the group was too small.

Had she come just five years earlier, there would have been no group at all.

The Saturday meetings are occasionally skipped for lack of attendance. For instance, Andy Caldiero, 73, won't be there on football game days — he's a stadium usher.

Three years ago, after a long illness and after she was denied psychiatric treatment from a center in Fayetteville, Caldiero's wife, Judith, purchased a pistol from a pawnshop and used it to end her suffering. She was 59. Afterward, friends and members of his church "would come up, and the common phrase is, 'I know what you're going through.' They don't have a clue. It's so totally different than someone wasting away with cancer or even an automobile accident. What goes through your mind is, 'What did I do ?' Survivorship, we all suffer the same [guilt] pangs," he says.

For a year after his wife's death, Caldiero suffered careening mood swings. He didn't know about the support group, and that is why he says he's willing to go public now.

“If just one person, if we can bring just one person into the Survivors of Suicide group, then I'll feel what I've done is successful.”

Tolliver established the group, and she says her core of eight or nine survivors is diverse and intimate. In its four years, she's welcomed about 50. Some have moved, some have moved on and at least one has died.

With wide, bright eyes and a youthful complexion, Tolliver is at once a surprising face for suicide awareness and an optimistic one.

She was just 25 years old when her first husband killed himself. That was in May 2002. She found solace in a regular group meeting in metropolitan Atlanta, but when she returned home to Bentonville she found no regular gathering. For months she got by on therapy and online chat rooms for people dealing with spousal suicide, but neither the individual attention of a counselor or the keystroke consolation inside cyberspace quite compared to the organic healing of a living, breathing community. When after several months she learned that The Crisis Center was preparing to begin a suicide support group, she knew this was a chance to make it happen.

With only the experience of her loss, Tolliver officially opened the regular meetings in October 2004.

“Most people who begin support groups don't have training,” she says, though she received some instruction from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

Today, core members of the group like Caldiero continue to attend meetings because they see their role as standing ready to comfort and assist new members, such as the woman from Atlanta. They are messengers espousing a new understanding of suicide, one not demeaned by accusations of selfishness or weakness.

“Most families are put off by that term, ‘selfish,’ or even ‘cowardly,’” Tolliver says. “Selfishness may seem to play a factor, but we’re talking about an individual in such a great amount of pain that their love for their family and their love for their life was outweighed by the pain they were going through.”

For the first time, the group is in the process of planning a walk, tentatively scheduled for March 14. Organizers are hoping for \$ 10, 000 and 50 participants, and they’re still searching for speakers. So far, they’ve secured a \$ 1, 000 grant from Wal-Mart.

Tolliver says the group may never foster enough sympathy for a major, convention-centersize fundraiser. Suicide, after all, is supposed to be shameful. Blame, not mercy, is typically given. Someone getting help after a suicide attempt doesn’t want publicity.

“We all have a tremendous guilt. We didn’t do enough, or we didn’t see it coming. There’s numerous reasons why we all blame ourselves, but we all do — it’s the common thread.”

Tolliver’s not deterred by the pressure to remain silent, and like Caldiero, she doesn’t want other survivors to go months without free group support if they want it.

“It should not be something that’s just not discussed.” For more information about Survivors of Suicide support group, call The Crisis Center, (479) 756-1995.

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