

your life



Ty could always make Nikki laugh—even during this serious family portrait.

“my brother’s
suicide is helping
save lives”

Nikki, 18, had never heard anyone talk about suicide before. But when it happened in her family, she couldn't keep silent. AS TOLD TO kierna mayo

My little brother, Tyler, and I were extremely close growing up. We'd make up top-secret handshakes after watching our favorite show, *The Suite Life of Zack & Cody*. We spent hours talking about music: I play the clarinet, and Ty was a true band geek whose trumpet was never far out of his reach. Sure, we bickered over stupid stuff—it drove me crazy when he'd leave up the toilet seat in the bathroom! But we told each other *everything*. Or so I'd thought.

DAZED AND CONFUSED

There was nothing particularly memorable about the cold midwinter Arkansas day when Ty killed himself. Ty, 14, got home from band practice and did the usual: cheerfully greeted everyone, then went straight to his room to practice his trumpet. Once dinner was ready, he joined my mom, my dad, and me to chow down on barbecued chicken while watching *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. I noticed then that Ty wasn't talking much—typically he and my dad joked around the whole time. But it didn't seem like anything was wrong, and after taking out the trash, Ty went back to his room. I had no idea it would be the last time I'd see him.

It was nearly 8 o'clock when I heard what sounded like glass breaking coming from Ty's room. My dad went to find out what happened, then my mom checked too before dragging me into their bedroom at the other side of the house. "What's going on?" I asked. She was crying so hard, she couldn't answer. Then my dad showed up with all of our shoes and coats and screamed, "He's still got a pulse. We're going to the emergency room!"

"Oh, my God, I don't get it! What happened?" I yelled. But no one answered me. All of a sudden, an ambulance was at my house, and we piled into the car and sped off behind it. The ride happened so fast—I was so scared, I blocked it all out. When we arrived at the hospital, Mom and I were put in a private room while my dad checked on Ty. "What's going on!?" I asked again. Mom was hyperventilating,

but she was able to catch her breath enough to say, "Ty tried to kill himself."

I was in total denial. "That's not funny!" I yelled. Then my dad returned, looked at my mom, and shook his head as if to say, "Ty didn't make it." My mom passed out. I didn't have any emotion. I wasn't even crying. *Nothing* made sense.

FEELING LOST

After Ty shot himself, my family alternated between tears and silence, barely leaving the house. I didn't go to school for more than four months. I just couldn't understand *why* he'd done it—he'd never said that anything was wrong,

“My dad shook his head as if to say ‘Ty didn’t make it.’”

and it wasn't until after Ty died that his friend told us that my brother had confessed to having thoughts of suicide. I went to therapy, but I didn't like talking to a stranger. Thankfully my best friend was always there for me, but she never pushed me to share my feelings.

When I returned to school, I was surprised that most people treated me normally. That helped because I wanted to act as if it hadn't happened. But just because nobody mentioned the word *suicide* didn't make it disappear. I felt so

Suicide is the third leading cause of death for people ages 15 to 24.



sharing a cause
Helping organize this suicide-awareness walk showed Nikki she is not alone.

alone with my feelings, and I didn't really have anyone I could turn to who had *real* experience with suicide. The following spring, I had to do a project for a community-service class, and I realized my topic *should* be suicide awareness. I thought if more people talked about it, maybe it wouldn't happen to another teen. I called the Arkansas Crisis Center, the group who'd spoken to kids at my brother's school right after his death. I told them I wanted to raise awareness and keep my brother's memory alive, and when I asked if I could help organize a 5K walk/run, they said yes! I was so comforted when I saw *hundreds* of people show up to support my family and other survivors who'd lost loved ones to suicide—I knew then that I wasn't alone.

SHEDDING SOME LIGHT

Being open about suicide rather than treating it like a secret felt so incredible that I started to speak at school assemblies. Sharing Ty's story is helping me heal, and so far I've had two people confess that they had thoughts of suicide. I directed them to help right away. It is so amazing to know that *another* family wouldn't have to go through what mine did. If Ty were here, I think he'd be really proud of me, and happy to know his life is having such a positive effect on others. 17

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Here's what to do if someone you know is in trouble.

✓ Know the signs.

Pay attention for major emotional shifts: Your friend has been acting depressed for two weeks or more, doesn't do stuff she usually loves, has mood swings, or suddenly keeps to herself.

✓ Tell somebody.

Never keep suicide a secret. If a friend admits she is thinking about hurting herself, tell a parent or a teacher—even if she has sworn you to secrecy. You could be saving her life.

✓ Get advice.

You can talk to a counselor at the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 24/7 at 800-273-TALK (8255). For more information, visit the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention's Web site at afsp.org.

17 EXPERTS: Terri Rose, Arkansas Crisis Center; Jamie Tworkowski, founder of To Write Love on Her Arms.