

The Committee Secretary
Standing Committee On Health Ageing, Community and Social Services,
Legislative Assembly for the ACT,
GPO Box 1020,
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Re: Inquiry Into Youth Suicide And Self Harm In The ACT

Dear Secretary,

My name is [REDACTED] and my daughter [REDACTED] killed herself in 2014. [REDACTED] was 15 years, 4 months and 7 days old. I was the last person to eat with [REDACTED], the last to talk with [REDACTED], and the last to see her alive. I was also the one to find [REDACTED], and together with [REDACTED]'s Mum we performed failed CPR. [REDACTED] was my only child however she left behind an adult sister and brother.

I previously worked in [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] I was trained in suicide prevention.

[REDACTED] was not bullied.

[REDACTED] was a member of a school leadership group and popular with both her school mates and teachers. [REDACTED] protected other students from bullying and would sometimes ask how to help others whom she thought were struggling.

According to [REDACTED]'s friends she did get drunk once, and was not into drugs.

██████ had a boyfriend, played soccer and was about to start part time at McDonalds.

The most concerning comment we ever received from a parent of ██████'s friends, or a coach, or a teacher, or from any adult for that matter, came at a parent teacher night – “██████ *should concentrate more on her work and less on helping others; she doesn't have to be Mother Theresa*”!

Youth suicide can come from nowhere and strike any young person, any family, any time.

The NSW Ombudsman reports a ‘cluster’ of youth suicides that occurred in 2014. A group of four young people considered linked who took their lives in just over three months. Three of those young people lived in the same local government area on the South Coast. The other, ██████, had moved to Queanbeyan several years earlier and was being schooled in the ACT.

██████ was collateral damage from the bullying of her close friend.

The number of young people taking their lives is most alarming, yet those statistics reflect only the tip of the iceberg. No statistic can measure the insidious mess that is left behind when a young person takes their life. An insidious mess that engulfs two families. Along with close friends, class mates, teachers, team mates, coaches, neighbours... the list goes on.

Until suicide comes close it is impossible to comprehend how deeply it is felt.

When you lose a child to suicide you start asking questions. Questions of yourself, your child, of other people, of everything. You look for answers and leave no stone unturned trying to put the picture together. You rehearse conversations and interactions over and over. You read her phone, her texts,

her diaries and journals, her school books, the computer, Facebook, the lot. You read articles about suicide and you read statistics on suicide. And you actually do put some of the picture together.

I made many mistakes and in hindsight there are many things I would do differently. I will grapple with these mistakes for the rest of my life. That said I do have some ideas on what could be done to help prevent other young people doing the same.

We need to raise **suicide awareness**.

How many people know the stats? Not many. My initial thoughts were that the statistics need to be broadcast into every Australian household, and every parent in Australia needs to know the most telling one:

“Suicide is the leading cause of death of children between 5 and 17 years”

To do that however is fraught with dangers. Most notably the ‘normalising’ of suicide for those young people at immediate risk.

I do understand the apprehension associated with talking about suicide, particularly with young people, however not talking is not working.

The bottom line is that while we don’t talk to young people about suicide, for fear of giving them ideas or evoking strong suicidal thoughts, the information about killing themselves is at their fingertips anyway.

The message of the statistics has to be delivered to parents, has to be delivered to the Australian public, on a national scale. How that is done given all the considerations is beyond me, perhaps social media or a national schools

program involving parents, I don't know. What I do know is that the statistics are absolutely frightening and the cost to the community immeasurable.

And here's another ABS statistic worth thinking about:

"Suicide is the leading cause of death for girls and young women under 34".

So suicide is the leading cause of death for both our children, and our young women. And that's not even talking about men. How many Australians are killed by terrorists? And how much money do we spend on preventing terrorism?

This issue should be beyond politics and the Australian government should be kicking in with bucket loads of funding, and helping as much as they can.

That won't happen in a hurry, so the ACT government is presented with an opportunity to provide the much needed leadership.

How the ACT Government could lead.

I recently watched a story on The Resilience Project which aims at helping young Australians keep mentally healthy. They facilitate courses in both primary and secondary schools. I'm not sure what goes on in ACT schools however I have heard from [REDACTED]'s friends that Headspace is doing some work.

The ACT Government would do well to provide resilience training to all students whether in this form or another. Information can be found at theresilienceproject.com.au

Resilience training for students within the schools could be combined with a program to increase suicide awareness for both students and parents.

From what I have learned these issues need to be included.

Young people need to be shown the full consequences of suicide – the horrendous truth about what is left behind. They need to be made aware of the trauma, the pain, the grief, the sadness that they would leave behind for family and friends.

Young people need to gain an appreciation of what suicide does to loved ones. A detailed understanding. From the trauma of discovering someone through to the effects on pets. They need a description of what actually happens. What happens in the first moments, the first hours, the first days, weeks, months. The first year.

We need to tell them the horrible truth - without reference to methods. This would probably best be done in the company of parents. We need to make young people aware of what actually happens beyond the funeral service where the deceased is spoken of in glowing terms, in an overflowing Church, beyond the numerous likes, comments and shares on Facebook. Beyond the balloon release.

We need to tell young people what happens in real life.

Young people need reminding about the permanence of suicide - not only that suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem, but also the permanence of the grief left behind; the life sentences left for mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, cousins, aunties and uncles, grandparents and closest friends.

Young people need to be made aware of the consequences of bullying – the collateral damage that can occur. [REDACTED]'s story exemplifies this – and needs to be told. As do many other stories.

Parents need to be shown youth suicide statistics.

This pretty much speaks for itself. The message that suicide kills more young people than anything else, and that no child is immune to suicide has to be delivered to parents. Hearing [REDACTED]'s story, and the stories of others, may help with this.

There are many statistics that can be used to drive this home, however the statistical part of the message may best be delivered to parents on their own.

Parents need to be familiar with methods and signs of suicidal intentions.

Sometime after [REDACTED] passed away I went to Google "How to kill yourself". With predictive text, or whatever it's called, up came "How to kill yourself properly". This was indeed a shock, however what was more shocking was the first site I clicked on. There were pro's and con's and recommendations for different methods of killing yourself, and step by step instructions on how to perform each method.

These were clear and lethal instructions that my daughter successfully followed.

This is something where the Australian Government needs to step in and stop the availability of this information. I won't write what I would do to those responsible for these sites, however it has to be made illegal.

In the interim parents must familiarise themselves with how easily, and how clinically, a young person can take their life. Parents also need to know what signs to look out for, and what to do if they are worried. Obviously this is a job for a professional.

Stigma.

No discussion of youth suicide is complete without talking about the stigma associated with both suicide and with mental health issues. This stigma is ingrained in the national psyche. This stigma had a part to play in [REDACTED]'s death, and continues to have an effect on me.

After [REDACTED]'s good friend took her life I went to [REDACTED]'s school the next day to let the teachers know. The teachers were most supportive of [REDACTED], as were we, her parents. They spoke to [REDACTED], we spoke to [REDACTED], we all offered her professional support. [REDACTED] declined on every occasion, and in hindsight I wish we had made her go.

What has become clear to me is that [REDACTED] in no way wanted to be seen as having a mental health issue. I believe now that teenagers are far more fearful of the stigma associated with mental health issues than even adults are.

We must make inroads into this stigma, and raising awareness and resilience training are ways we can help that. We can also provide them with examples of people who have faced and overcome mental health problems. We have to normalise it, and the more “normal” people they see talking about their experience, and how they have overcome their problems, the greater the inroads we will make.

Any presentation in a school will be more effective with some success stories, preferably from ‘normal’ people who can engage them. In the ACT I know of one fellow who does this well – Google ‘joshillusions’ and you will find him.

I think this inquiry is a wonderful initiative and am happy to have had a say. I am happy to expand or clarify any concepts I have discussed.

I am happy to lend a hand in any capacity with this project, including telling [REDACTED]'s story.

Kind regards

[REDACTED]

6 April 2016

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]