One family’s effort to prevent suicide

In the wake of tragedy, the Barber family funds critical training

Sometimes in life, events occur that fracture the very foundation on which we stand. That’s exactly what happened to the Barber family when their son Josh took his own life in 2010.

A talented blues guitarist and songwriter, Josh had struggled with severe depression for years. His parents, John and Darla, and his sister Maggie Barber- Leclerc had been there through it all. “It was like riding a roller coaster. Most people had no idea how much Josh or our family were suffering,” said Maggie.

Even in the midst of the difficult grieving process, the Barbers knew right away they wanted to find a way to celebrate Josh’s life and shape their grief into action. “We wanted to make things better for others who were suffering like him,” explains Maggie. They created We All Move On (WAMO), a nonprofit foundation dedicated to promoting awareness about depression and raising money for services that help people in circumstances similar to Josh’s. The Barbers also put Josh’s story into a book called Becoming the Blues: A Family Memoir.

Adversity Into Education

In addition to WAMO’s regular annual fundraisers the Barbers also wanted to help provide some knowledge to clinical professionals in the area. Last October, the Providence Center (TPC) organized a full-day suicide prevention training made possible by a generous donation from WAMO.

Shawn Christopher Shea, MD, a celebrated workshop leader, author and expert in the fields of suicide prevention training, presented to 75 clinical therapists, case managers, nurses and other behavioral health professionals from The Providence Center and other institutions.

Dr. Shea’s training provided guidelines for appropriately documenting a suicide assessment using risk and protective factors, and introduced an interviewing strategy, called the Chronological Assessment of Suicide Event (CASE) Approach, which can help a clinician evaluate the client’s actual suicidal intent.

“We were thrilled to be able to provide this session to those that can actually help make a difference,” said Darla Barber. “We wanted to help give clinical employees the right tools to better educate themselves and positively affect change in the way they provide care.”

Making a Long-Lasting Impact

The employees who saw the original training won’t be the only ones who benefit; the feedback from the training was so positive that Lawrence Miller, a TPC clinical trainer, used the information to create an official suicide prevention training for staff members. 54 staff members have taken part in the 6 hours of training, and over 300 staff are expected to be trained in suicide prevention over the next few years. After completing the training, many TPC staff members also read Becoming the Blues, and feel that the memoir gave them real life insight into the pressures of the patient and the toll depression takes on families.

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“We couldn’t be happier that our gift will help raise awareness and support the needs of others suffering like Josh. It’s a great way to honor his memory for years to come,” said John. The Barber family is committed to finding more ways to spread education and reduce the stigma surrounding depression and mental illness in the future.

Becoming the Blues: A Family Memoir is available at www.becomingtheblues.com and at www.amazon.com

Self portrait by Josh Barber. The left side of the painting demonstrates the pain Josh felt inside. The right side shows the smile he would portray to the outside world masking his true feelings.