

Mother copes with son's suicide, seeks to help others

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By David San Miguel

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It was an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach that alerted Deborah Sosa that something was wrong.

She held fast to a pact with her son, Mathew, that if either of them did not hear from each other during the course of the day that they would "blow out the other's phone or drive out to reach them."

It was a pact they had devised to ensure each other's safety considering the remoteness of their Utah desert community and her long commute from work over the Stansbury Mountains to get there.

With a population of 31,000, Tooele, is some 40 miles away from the Mission and Installation Contracting Command -- Dugway Proving Ground where Sosa is employed as a purchasing agent.

"It was our way to make sure the other person was okay," she said. "I would always call him on each side of the mountain to let him know I was traveling, especially on days when my husband didn't travel with me or was out of town. We would even call each other if an ambulance drove through Main Street. We'd check on each other."

It was 3:15 p.m. and all attempts to reach him by phone had failed.

It was all the mother could do, but race to reach her son's apartment.

Mathew struggled with depression his whole life. During the past few days he had seemed a little on edge, his mother recalled. Only a few weeks had passed since his girlfriend had severed their relationship. She was more than concerned.

"I arrived at his apartment at 4:30 p.m.," she said. "The doors were locked and Mathew didn't respond to the pounding at the door."

In near panic, Sosa hurried her daughter to get the landlady and to call for help.

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"Grandma Jean," she said, "was very close. She is our substitute grandma -- always with us. Mathew kept an eye on her, helped with the property and she, in turn, helped him with lower rent and a nice place to live."

The discovery

"We walked in calling his name and there was still no answer," she said. "I found him lying on the floor -- the gun on his chest and the phone in his hand. I called 911 and started CPR."

Sosa's attempts to revive her son proved futile. It was too late.

"It hurt... it hurt bad!" she exclaimed. "I hid my face in my sister's shoulder and cried."

On Aug. 11, 2008, Mathew Jason Marcum was dead -- one of 31 suicides reported in Tooele County by the Utah Department of Health between 2004 and 2008.

Reaching out

"What does a mother do?" she asked. "How does one respond to the stares or the hushed conversations at the grocery store?"

In her search for answers, Sosa teamed up with a longtime friend, Tammy Pyne, whose 24-year-old son had also committed suicide. Together, they planned and hosted a Suicide Survivors Day at the local Moose Lodge.

Sponsored by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, Suicide Survivors Day is held each year on Nov. 19, to help survivors cope with the "heartbreaking loss" of a loved one through suicide.

Sosa admits that there is a stigma associated with suicide and individuals may not know where to go for help.

"I'd like to make those resources known to everyone," she said. "I want to give people a chance to share their stories with someone who understands... to heal and hear from professionals. I don't want them to forget the person they loved."

Chaplain (Lt. Col.) Charles M. Fields, Army Contracting Command, said nothing beats a friend or co-worker walking up to someone they think may be at risk and asking, 'Are you thinking of killing yourself?'

"Because of the stigma associated with suicide," he said. "People at risk often refuse to ask for help or contact any agency established to help them. In most cases, others must make the first move."

It's a call to action and awareness and assistance that has not gone unheeded by Army leadership.

According to Gen. Ray Odierno, the Army's chief of staff, there is nothing more important than the health and well-being of our Soldiers, DA civilians and family members.

"We need each and every member of our team," the general said. "One suicide is one too many. Prevention and intervention efforts must be at the top of our priorities. They are also critical to maintaining trust, the bedrock of our profession."

Odierno added that individuals must trust their peers and their leaders to help them through difficult times.

Leaders can make a difference, one individual at a time, by recognizing and responding to high risk behavior early, he said. "I believe it is a sign of strength to ask for help."

Soldiers and families in need of crisis assistance should contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. Trained consultants are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year and can be contacted by dialing 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or by visiting their website at <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>.

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