Teen Suicide Is On The Rise Nationwide – And In South Florida

BY LYNN ALLISON

Her obituary said that "her smile would light up a room." But on May 21, 2013, that light went out.

Bailey Mae Leal, a 17-year-old soccer star and extraordinary student who lived in Parkland, hung herself in the closet of her bedroom. She was found by her parents, Pamela and Cesar, who say they cannot erase the final image of their beloved daughter.

"I will never forget the vision of her wearing her black shorts with the words "I'm sorry" written all over her body with green magic marker – her favorite color," says Pam. "I kept trying to get her down, hoping against hope that she'd still be alive. When in my heart, I knew she was gone."

"Cesar would not let go of Bailey's body. The doctor held her until the authorities arrived and prised his daughter from his arms."

The shock of Bailey's death ravaged the community like a giant hurricane. She was a popular senior at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland. Bailey played soccer for the Boca United travel team and the Stoneman Douglas varsity team. Three weeks prior to her death, she scored 34 out of 36 on the ACT college-entrance exams and had just returned from a successful road trip with her father to visit Dartmouth College and Princeton University.

"Bailey was a rock star in every area of her life," Pam says. "She was beautiful, had a lot of friends, but she didn't perceive herself as being loved. She probably suffered from a mental disorder, but we didn't know it. There is no history of mental illness in the family."

Pam says she first noticed there was something amiss when Bailey started becoming withdrawn and suffering from insomnia, but Pam chalked it up to teenage moodiness.

"But when she told me she was thinking of taking her life, we took her to a psychologist," she says. "Our insurance money ran out, and she seemed fine, and the doctor didn't think anything was wrong, so we stopped therapy."

Bailey left behind her parents and three sisters: twins Paige and Marisa, 22, and Madison, 14. The devastating effect on the family is still simmering. Marisa suffered two psychotic episodes following her sister's death and had to be hospitalized for psychiatric evaluation and treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder.

"I know she didn't do this to us," says Pam. "She did it to end her own pain and the pain she perceived she was inflicting on her family."
"Suicide claims the lives of 100 young people each week. If that were a virus, we wouldn't call it an epidemic - but a pandemic."

_— Clark Flatt, founder of The Jason Foundation_

**THE STAGGERING STATISTICS**

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the number of young adults who commit suicide has been rising since 2007.

"The data don't allow us to determine why," says the CDC's Thomas Simon, a suicide expert. "Is it social media? Is it conventional media? We just don't know."

The Jason Foundation, founded by Clark Flatt in honor of his son Jason, who took his life in 1997 at age 16, reports staggering statistics. Nationally, 29.9 percent of young people - that's one out of three - say they have experienced feelings of hopelessness and sadness for a constant period of two weeks or more in the past year. In Florida, that statistic is 25.8 percent. (Untreated depression is the leading cause of suicide.) In the United States, 17 percent of young people have considered suicide, while in Florida, the figure is 13.9 percent. Nationally, 8 percent of young people have attempted suicide, while in Florida, that number is 7.7 percent.

Suicide is the second leading cause of death (behind unintentional injury) among teens and young adults, says Flatt. Five years ago, it was the third leading cause. It is estimated that close to 1 million people attempt suicide each year, and more than 41,149 people die, including 5,000 young adults. Nine out of 10 people who die by suicide have a diagnosable mental illness at the time of their death, making it a preventable death if the illness were caught early.

Dr. Jill Harkavy-Friedman leads the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention's research program. She's a pioneer in suicide research and the first scientist to delve into the suicidal ideation and behavior of high school students.

"Mental health concerns such as depression, psychosis and drug and alcohol abuse are almost always present when someone dies by suicide," she says. "Many of these problems first surface after puberty, when hormones rage. Early intervention can be most effective, so teaching young people to pay attention to their mental health, as much as their physical health, can have a huge impact."

She points out that many parents mistake mental illness for the angst of temperamental teens.

"In 1985, when I first started researching teenage suicide, nobody talked about depression," she says. "There was the perception that kids just don't get depressed."

Dr. Harkavy-Friedman says parents should be vigilant about changes in behavior that last more than two weeks. And families should know that treatment is available and can make a real difference.

**SHOCK WAVES:** Above, Clark Flatt with son Jason months before the teen's suicide; (Left) Dr. Jill Harkavy-Friedman of American Foundation for Suicide Prevention; (Opposite) Jim Hollen holds a photo collage of daughter Madison.

"We have very effective treatments to cope with depression that are geared just for kids," she says. "We also can teach them a safety plan on how to distract their own minds when they feel they are falling back into the dark hole, such as activities that will engage them more positively or people they can talk to and feel safe."

But the bottom line is communication, she says: "The most important piece of advice I have is to keep talking to your kids. Talk saves lives."

Flatt, of Hendersonville, Tenn., says that he probably did see signs of mental disorder in his son Jason, who shot himself. But at the time,
he didn’t recognize them.

"He was my youngest son," Flatt says. "After his death, I decided to devote my life to creating awareness of the mental health issues in young people and to suicide prevention."

The Jason Foundation is a nonprofit that's pushing for state legislation to make all educators aware of suicide prevention techniques. In 2007, the Jason Flatt Act was first passed in Tennessee, requiring all educators in that state to complete two hours of youth suicide awareness and prevention training each year in order to be licensed to teach. Since then, 15 more states have followed suit.

"The teachers often see these kids more than the parents and can monitor any significant changes in their behavior with peers, sports or their studies," he explains. "They need to know what to say and how to intervene if they spot potentially dangerous changes in behavior."

THE BRIGHTEST STARS CAN FALL

The untimely death of 19-year-old Madison Holleran, a University of Pennsylvania student who jumped to her death in 2014 from atop a parking garage, stunned the nation. She bore an uncanny resemblance to Bailey and was also a varsity athlete and an "A" student. For Holleran, the transition from high school to college proved to be overwhelming.

She admitted she was depressed, and her parents took her words seriously and sought therapy.

"I could see it," says her father, Jim, in an interview. "Her face was white, and she just wasn’t herself."

After winter break, she appeared to be better and returned to college with the agreement that she could transfer to another school if she weren’t happy. Days later, she committed suicide.

"It’s most often the bright, shining stars that are victims to suicide," Flatt says. "In fact, the majority of teenage suicides are the football captains, the better-than-average students who give you the impression that they’ve got it all."

To honor Holleran’s memory and prevent future teen suicides, her family established the Madison Holleran Foundation. It seeks to assist those in a crisis as well as to prepare high school seniors and college freshmen for the difficulty of leaving home, which became unbearable for Holleran.

"Fortunately, four out of five kids who attempt suicide are helped by therapy," Flatt says. "It’s that 20 percent we have to watch out for. Suicide claims the lives of 100 young people aged 10 to 24 each week. If that were a virus attacking 100 people each week, we wouldn’t call it an epidemic – but a pandemic."

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—Dr. Jill Horkavy-Friedman, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

SOCIAL MEDIA AND SUICIDE

Experts ponder what role social media and online bullying (or cyberbullying) may be playing in the rise of teenage suicide. A case in point is the horrific death of a Florida girl that also made national headlines.

In September 2013, 12-year-old Rebecca Sedwick of Lakeland climbed a tower in an abandoned concrete plant and jumped to her death. She had been bullied on social media for more than a year. Police
arrested a 12-year-old girl and her 14-year-old friend and charged them with third-degree felony aggravated stalking because of Rebecca's age and the fact that the teenagers who bullied her weren't the least bit remorseful. Later, charges were dropped.

At its worst, social media provides an unregulated forum for bullying and abuse; at its best, even when used appropriately, it can be intimidating and confusing for vulnerable teens.

"People post only the happy, carefree pictures, so everything seems to be fine," says Dr. Harkavy-Friedman. "Depressed teens who see photos of their friends all cheery and bright begin to think something is wrong with them because they are feeling down. They don't realize that an Instagram picture is just a picture and not reality."

It is rumored that Bailey was upset when a classmate posted online an insinuation that she cheated on her ACT exam because her scores were so high. Bailey's last Tweet said: "Now I see why everyone hates me. I hate myself."

Her sister agrees that social media can be deceiving.

"Bailey was a rock star in every area of her life. She probably suffered from a mental disorder, but we didn't know it."

— Pamela Leal, mother of Bailey

"You can filter a photo, but you cannot filter your emotions," Marisa says. "You think that everyone else is having such a great time, and you're miserable. You don't realize that this may be a very false image."

Marisa admits she may have followed in her sister's footsteps had she not witnessed firsthand the devastation of Bailey's death.

"The thought of suicide crossed my mind, but I just couldn't do that to my family," she says.

Her psychotic breakdowns led to a barrage of medications that dragged her into a terrifying maelstrom. Eventually, with the right therapy, she was weaned off the drugs. However, Pam, her mom, could not deal with another one of her daughters heading down a dan-
Dr. Bernstein, a licensed psychologist and certified addiction professional, says that by reducing the stigma of mental illness, more doors will be opened to provide help for individuals at risk.

"Thanks to the Affordable Care Act, insurance companies are now covering mental health ailments in the same way they cover physical illness, so there is finally parity between the two," he says. "If we can identify those in need, we can help get them on the path to recovery. We have wonderful treatment options today and many resources, such as the Faulk Center for Counseling and the Ruth & Norman Rales Jewish Family Services, both in Boca Raton, that offer excellent services for those with mental illness."

Mental Health First Aid is another crucial course implemented by Boca Raton's Promise and the Alpert Jewish Family & Children's Service that is taught by nationally certified instructors to anyone in public service or any caring citizen.

"It's an eight-hour course that helps first responders identify people in distress and teaches them how to talk and deal with them effectively," Dr. Bernstein says. "We've already trained 1,200 people, including 600 sheriff's deputies, in Palm Beach County."

Dr. Bernstein, who has been the staff psychologist and director of community engagement at Boys Town South Florida since 2008, says he volunteers his time because of his passion to educate others and remove the black cloud that hangs over the heads of those who suffer from mental illness.

"I care," he says. "It is my passion. And here in Florida, a state which does not provide much funding for mental health issues, we have a long way to go to overcome the stigma and provide services for those desperately in need. Suicide is a mostly preventable death, and I want to do everything in my power to avoid this ultimate tragedy among our youth."

Bailey's family is still struggling with the aftermath of their ultimate tragedy. Pam has even changed physically. She is now raut and sinewy, having channeled her grief into hours of yoga and going for sunrise runs, when she allows herself to cry and scream in the wind.

She helped organize a chapter of HOPE (Helping Overcome Problems Effectively) - a network of support clubs for teens established by the Florida Initiative for Suicide Prevention - at Stoneman Douglass and holds "yogathons" to raise funds for their activities.

"I want Bailey's life to be a legacy," she says. "She was a beautiful girl. What she did was hide her feelings, and it shouldn't have happened. Her death is my work."

RESOURCES

211: WILL ROUTE YOU TO AREA-APPROPRIATE HELP OR RESOURCES

600-273-TALK (8255): NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE

AFSP.ORG

BOCARATONSPromise.ORG

FISP.HOPE.ORG

JASONFOUNDATION.COM

MADISONHOLLERANFOUNDATION.ORG