

SHINING A LIGHT





Sue Serlin-Resnick is pictured in this snapshot with her son, Joel.

Mom recalls son's struggle; says society needs to address suicide and its prevention

BY SUSAN STEINMUELLER
STAFF WRITER

Sue Serlin-Resnick's son, Joel, a University of Iowa student, was bright, charismatic, athletic and popular.

"If he walked in a room, his presence was very strong. You knew he was a leader."

But she knew her son lived with a secret.

Joel suffered from major depression, which he hid from the world, and sometimes considered suicide.

"He had it all. He had people who loved him but he was the most alone person in the world."

Serlin-Resnick, of Southfield, tried to help him in every way she could.

Especially in his last two years - which she said ironically were his most profound in terms of achievement and helping others - she "walked the path of mental illness with him."

But medication and other efforts did not work. On Sept. 22, 1998, at age 31, Joel Serlin "reached a conclusion that the pain was so unbearable that it was better to take a chance on the unknown

PLEASE SEE SUICIDE, C3

LAWRENCE MCKEE STAFF
PHOTOGRAPHER

Sue Serlin-Resnick of Southfield holds a photo of herself and son Joel during a happy time.

Guidelines call for support and assistance

Matthew Thomas Zimmer, Crisis Unit manager at Common Ground Sanctuary in Bloomfield Hills, says to take suicide threats seriously. It is a myth that people who threaten suicide don't really mean it, he said.

Arguing or telling them to "get over it" is not helpful, according to Common Ground guidelines. Hear what they are going through without feeling the need to "fix" it for them. Ask how you can be helpful.

National statistics show that some 29,000 people a year commit suicide, he said. Suicide is the third leading cause of death

for 15- to 24-year-olds, and the sixth leading cause of death for 5- to 14-year-olds.

Some 90 percent of people who kill themselves suffer from a diagnosable and preventable problem such as depression, statistics show. Depression and suicidal feelings are treatable mental disorders.

Common Ground information says that if a child says, I want to kill myself, seek assistance from a qualified mental health professional. Asking whether he or she is depressed or thinking about

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Recipient receives prestigious United Way kindness award

SUICIDE

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rather than live in desperation and severe pain."

That day he died by suicide.

A CLOSET ISSUE

Like all suicides do, his death devastated his family and friends.

"Joel had physical, mental and emotional pain. He never saw a light at the end of the tunnel," she said. In that sense, she compares it to having a terminal disease.

But the question of why he committed suicide and others who are mentally ill don't is ultimately still a mystery.

"Mental illness is very individualized. It's not necessarily an outcome of depression. It's a disease unto itself in my opinion and in the opinion of some doctors. Why is it that some people get better and my son didn't? If we knew that, we could help all the Joels who are suffering."

Society should pay more attention to the issue, Serlin-Resnick believes.

"We know more than we knew before but it's still a closet issue. We need to address this on a much larger scale as being a much more serious situation, which is on the rise in younger children and older people."

She added, "In my opinion, we do not know the exact statistics, because it is kept in a closet. Sometimes, nobody knows it's a suicide. People who have suicidal tendencies don't come out and say, by the way, I have suicidal tendencies."

AN ATHLETE, WRITER

Serlin says that her son grew up as an athlete. She has wondered if a diving team accident in which he hit his head while attending high school in Oak Park triggered his illness, although no injury was diagnosed at the time.

"We don't know when it started," she said, "but we saw signs about six years before he

AREA SUPPORT GROUPS

Common Ground

For survivors of the suicide of a loved one, the Survivors of Suicide (SOS) Support Group meets 7-9 p.m. the second and fourth Tuesdays of the month at the main office, 1410 S. Telegraph, Bloomfield Hills.

Walk-ins are welcome. For more information, call the 24-hour crisis line at (248) 456-0909 or (800) 231-1127.

National Council of Jewish Women

The Suicide Survivors Support Group - Space for Changing Families meets in Southfield.

Contact Cheryl R. - (248) 355-9936

Grief and Loss Program

For those who have had family or friends lost by suicide; established by individuals within the group.

First Wednesday of the month - 1:30 p.m. Royal Oak

No charge, facilitator-therapist Dorit Silver.

Call (248) 546-6432

Compassionate Friends

Meets at 7 p.m. first Wednesday of the month at 16700 Newburgh, Livonia.

Call the National Office for detail as to other locations - (877) 969-0010

answers, doing a "tremendous amount of research."

Serlin-Resnick followed up on leads such as one at Stanford University, that vitamins could help suicidal tendencies. Especially in his last two years, she listened to her son a lot. He expressed his gratitude, she said.

She also consulted organizations such as the American Association of Suicidology, an education and resource organization.

To help him cope, Joel wrote. "His professor said he was a brilliant writer," said Serlin-Resnick.

He also remained involved and active on campus. She says she does not understand how he did so while battling mental illness.

JOURNEY OF HEALING

three at other locations.

Then the long journey of healing began for Serlin-Resnick. She said she was helped by the abundance of support from family and friends.

She also signed up for metaphysical and grief and loss groups. Then she began to give presentations sharing what she knows.

She tells people, "The most important gift you can give to a person who is suicidal is to listen, and then to get them help. Don't dismiss it. They are telling you, help me."

And, "Don't judge. They are doing the best they can with the information they have."

She has found that "Forgiveness is a vital part of neutralizing negative energy for the person challenged by mental illness as well as the