

May 11, 2025

On Mother's Day, I will be thinking of all of the Moms. I wish you all a peaceful day. Remind yourselves of the joy your child brought into your lives. Celebrate the gift of your child.

I wrote this piece in May of 2017. As I re-read it, it reminds me of the progress that has been made with eliminating stigma. It also reminds me that we still have a long way to go.

- Tricia Baker

The Empty Chair

May 2017 (REPRINT) – On Mothers' Day, many families will be celebrating, sharing happy memories and creating new ones. Toasts will be made to moms of all ages and their children will be with them, either in person or over the phone or Internet. However, for some mothers, this will be a bittersweet day. They'll have good memories to reminisce about while reliving the pain of losing their children – in many cases, to suicide.

My husband and daughter and I always choose to spend holidays at restaurants. Our table for three always has an empty chair: a painful reminder of Kenny's absence. After almost eight years, the pain still strikes like a physical blow.

Kenny was popular, a hard worker and a successful student and athlete. Teachers and students liked and admired him. However, this changed after Kenny was diagnosed with severe depression and anxiety. Because of stigma, we didn't tell anyone about these illnesses, although it was evident something was wrong. Because of a lack of understanding, teachers thought he was lazy, despite his record of having been an excellent student, and his friends kept their distance. After Kenny took his own life, we faced discrimination.

People tried to “dig out the dirt” of our alleged mistreatment of Kenny. Nothing could be further from the truth. If love were enough to help people with mental health disorders, Kenny would still be alive. As May is Mental Health Month, we are reinforcing the need to eliminate stigma. The only way to do this is through education. We strive to provide this vital education to youth and adults all year long. Our society in general has made some progress toward eliminating stigma. Mental health disorders are discussed a bit more openly now, along with substance use disorders, which are common co-occurring illnesses along with mental health disorders. Individuals with untreated mental health disorders are three to four times more likely to self-medicate with alcohol or other drugs, significantly increasing their risk of developing addictions. Some news reports of suicides touch on mental health disorders, which are underlying factors in more than 90% of these deaths.

The suicide rate is increasing nationally and even more significantly in New Jersey. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among 10- to 24-year-olds across the country, and the suicide rate in this age group in New Jersey has increased by 14% from 2015 to 2016. Our society has overcome stigma against cancer and, as a result, ended the silence that was so common before understanding of this illness – or at least a nonjudgmental perception of it and the people who have it – became common. We made similar progress regarding HIV and AIDS. This bodes well for the ultimate eradication of stigma against mental health disorders, individuals who have them and suicide.

The decision to take one’s life is made by an unhealthy brain. If symptoms of mental health disorders are recognized and help is sought immediately, the brain can be successfully treated, and suicide can be prevented.

AIR's Coming Up For AIR Mental Wellness training for youth and parents is essential for all. This program is necessary to develop the abilities to recognize and understand mental health disorders and to effectively help people experiencing crises or struggling for extended periods of time. It can save lives. It has saved lives.

Youth also must be educated so they feel comfortable asking for help for themselves and assist their friends in getting help if needed.

Mental-health and suicide-prevention education must be a part of health education in schools, ideally beginning in middle school, as 50% of mental health disorders develop by age 14. The risk remains high up until age 25, as the brain continues to develop throughout this time. In fact, 75% of mental health disorders develop by age 25.

Losing Kenny and battling stigma and discrimination have ignited my family's mission to help prevent such tragedies for other youth and their families...so many more mothers, their children and other loved ones can enjoy Mothers' Day together for years to come.