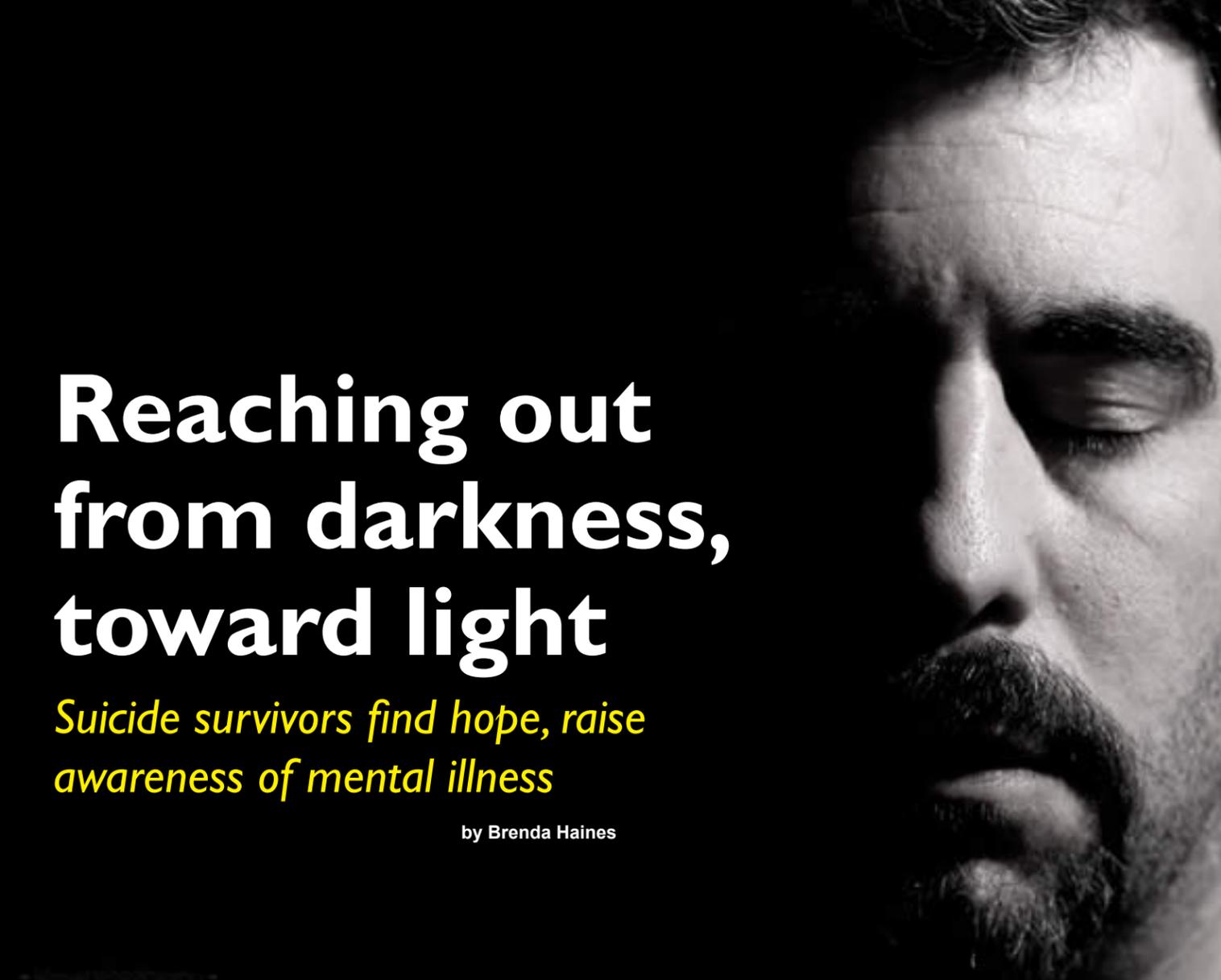


Reaching out from darkness, toward light

Suicide survivors find hope, raise awareness of mental illness

by Brenda Haines



Heather Logan reaches toward the light to help symbolize how the Out of the Darkness walk is going to help her cope with the tragic loss of her husband, Brian, to suicide Sept. 26, 2009. Logan, a native of Girard, Ohio, hopes to help other survivors by participating in the walk Oct. 9, 2010.

Left: Suicide survivor Steve Neral reflects while the sun slowly warms his face. Neral lost his son, Tyler, to suicide Nov. 15, 2009, and, along with his wife Amy, will participate in the Out of the Darkness walk Oct. 9, 2010.

treated others well.”

The pair soon became “high school sweethearts,” she said. After graduation from Girard High School, they attended Youngstown State University together, eventually married and had a son.

“I always said how lucky I was that I got to marry my best friend in the whole world,” said Logan, an alumna of YSU with a bachelor’s degree in computing and information systems. “How many people can say that?”

Logan said she noticed a gradual change in her husband that was unexplained.

“About a year and a half ago, Brian started to pull away from us [his family and friends],” said Logan.

He seemed to lose interest in everything he once loved, including their son, and it really scared her, she said.

“He knew something was wrong,” said Logan. “He even sought out professional help.”

Despite the support from his wife, family, friends and local medical professionals, Brian Logan was lost to suicide Sept. 26, 2009.

“I don’t want to be silent, embarrassed or ashamed,” said Logan. “Silence is the biggest contributor to the stigma that hangs over suicide survivors.”

Tyler’s story

Amy Neral, a resident of Brookfield and volunteer with the walk, sports a blue and purple wristband that reads “Out of the Darkness, www.afsp.org.”

“We have sold a lot of these wristbands, mostly to young people, including students at YSU,” said Neral. “Almost everyone I have talked to has been touched by suicide in some way.”

Neral said her son, Tyler, was an average teenager. He had lots of friends, a part-time job and enjoyed working on his car.

“One day, Tyler stood up for a younger, smaller student who was being bullied by someone twice his size,” she said. “He made the bully stop without letting it evolve into a fight.”

That’s just the way he was, Neral said. He was compassionate and loving from the time he was a child.

“There are many things I will always remember — the love he had for his sisters, Jessica and Samantha, and the classroom library he started in third grade because the first-year teacher didn’t have any books for the students to read.”

Neral said Tyler took initiative and began the Brookfield Middle School Snack Attack program while he was a student there.

“He collected leftover individually wrapped Teddy Grahams that were being discarded, so he could donate them to a community center in Farrell for children who appreciated them.”

Despite the love and support from his family and friends, Tyler Thomas Neral was lost to suicide Nov. 15, 2009.

“I will always remember the strength he showed for those who needed support, and the initiative that brought changes to the world around him,” said Neral.

After her son’s death, Neral received a message from one of Tyler’s friends. It contained a letter that he had written to her shortly before his death:

“If I said I’d protect you from everything, I’d be lying, partially because that’s impossible and because I wouldn’t. Not that I want you to get hurt, but I’d want you to be your own person and make and learn from your own mistakes. But I will always be here to pick you up when you get knocked down and maybe soften the landing.”

It is Tyler’s compassion to soften everyone else’s fall that inspired Neral and her husband, Steve, to become involved with AFSP and the walk.

“I’m working very hard to bring an AFSP chapter here to the Mahoning Valley,” said Neral. “The services and programs that it can provide will make a huge difference in the lives of residents in this area.”

Bringing the light closer

The Out of the Darkness Community Walks were created by the AFSP as a way to raise funds for the organization’s programs and increase community awareness about suicide and mental illness.

According to the National Center for Health Statistics, approximately 90 percent of people that die by suicide suffer from depression, a treatable medical illness. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students and approximately one out of six students is affected by depression.

“Most suicidal people are not psychotic or insane, and they don’t want to die,” said Congressman Tim Ryan in a public service announcement for Help Hotline, a call-in crisis center in Youngstown. “They just want the pain to stop. Over half of the people that committed suicide sought medical help within six months of their death. Bringing up the subject and discussing it openly may help prevent it. Reducing the stigma surrounding suicide is the best chance we have of saving lives.”

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— *Congressman Tim Ryan*

Neral said the first step to saving lives is to raise the funds necessary to establish an AFSP chapter in Mahoning Valley. The money raised by the walk will go toward the implementation of that AFSP chapter, and it will serve the entire Mahoning Valley. Last year, more than 250 people participated and the walk yielded approximately \$16,000.

“Suicide is a national health problem; but, in addition, is plagued by silence and stigma that continue to be barriers for seeking help,” said Neral. “This walk will help bring the light closer for survivors and those struggling with depression. Our goal is to raise approximately \$10,000, which will be used to fund research and much needed prevention and survivor programs here in the Valley.”

For some survivors mourning the loss of a loved one to suicide, the walk means something special.

“When Brian died, I knew I wanted to do something in his memory, but I didn’t know what,” said Logan. “For me, this is it. I am involved with something bigger than me, something that can help others. I’m not just walking; I’m volunteering as well. I want to encourage people to help break the silence by participating in this walk and helping to raise awareness for this very important cause.”



Heather and Brian Logan share an intimate moment during a friend’s party in the mid-1990s while they were students at Youngstown State University. Brian Logan, a native and lifelong resident of Girard, was lost to suicide Sept. 26, 2009. Heather Logan plans to walk and volunteer at the Mahoning Valley Out of the Darkness Community Walk scheduled for Oct. 9, 2010, at Mill Creek Park in Youngstown to help raise awareness in his memory.

October 13 is expected to be a typical crisp, fall day at Mill Creek Park in Youngstown. As the rays of sunshine bounce off of the lakes, golf course and trees, people will unite, holding photos and mementos that symbolize the love and memories they hold in their hearts for loved ones taken from them too soon. These participants were unexpectedly thrust into the darkness and left to cope with the aftermath caused by suicide and mental illness.

On this day, walkers will learn that they are not alone, as they are joined by others who are also living in this wake. Together, they will take the first steps necessary to bring suicide and mental illness out of the darkness in the Mahoning Valley.

This simple walk through the park, known as the third annual Mahoning Valley Out of the Darkness Community Walk will raise funds for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, the leading not-for-profit organization exclusively dedicated to understanding and preventing suicide.

“Every 15 minutes someone dies by suicide in the U.S.,” said Robert Gebbia, executive director for AFSP. “This fall, thousands are walking to raise money for prevention and awareness, and offer hope to the millions of Americans who have lost a loved one to suicide or who battle personally with depression, bipolar illness and other mental illnesses.”

Brian’s story

Heather Logan was in high school when she met Brian. She said she remembers thinking how attractive he was and noticed what a great smile he had.

“We quickly became good friends,” said Logan. “I was friends with a lot of people that he was friends with, so we always found ourselves in the same place. He used to always light up the room. He was a very kind person and

