

Park benches in Suffolk carry messages of hope to veterans contemplating suicide



A bench on the West Sayville Golf Course across from the veteran's memorial, which displays a plaque with a suicide hotline number, Thursday. It was provided by the Suffolk Masonic District. Credit: Thomas A. Ferrara

By Lauren Zola
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Daniel Di Natale was 16 when met his friend Peter Schank, while working at a Buffalo toy store. Schank, then 12, used to hang around the shop.

Their bond strengthened over the years when they both joined a Buffalo chapter of the fraternal organization, the Freemasons. But when Schank joined the Army and returned from his third deployment in Afghanistan, he was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. At the age of 30, he took his own life.

At the funeral service, Di Natale said Schank was called a "warrior poet."

"He was the only person I've ever met that could quote 16th century English poetry," Di Natale, 40, said of his late friend. "And then, you know, you [could] talk to him about football."

In honor of his friend, Di Natale, along with two others, started a nonprofit called the Battle Within Foundation to honor veterans who have committed suicide. The organization is placing benches in golf

courses and parks across New York State, including five in Suffolk County, to reach out to veterans who may be contemplating taking their own lives.

Di Natale said he did not want Schank to become another name or see another veteran become a statistic.

"I lost a friend, and we didn't want his memory to go away," Di Natale said.

So far, 30 benches have been placed across the state. The placards say, in part: "To minimize the alarming rate of suicides, we've dedicated this bench as a safe space for veterans to reach out to other veterans. If the bench is empty, you're still not alone — a free, confidential Veterans Crisis Support Line is available 24/7, 365 days a year."



Plaque on a bench on the West Sayville Golf Course across from the veteran's memorial, provided by the Suffolk Masonic District, Thursday. Credit: Newsday/Thomas A. Ferrara

Robert Licata leads the Suffolk Masonic District, a Freemason chapter on Long Island, which fundraises to pay for the benches. Licata, 84, of Coram, is a Navy veteran who served for about three years during the 1960s.

Licata said there are benches installed in Babylon, West Sayville, Port Jefferson, Farmingville and East Hampton.

"We want to have as many people as we can pass and look at these benches, and hopefully a veteran or someone in distress will see the bench and know that there's people out there that care for them," he said.

Licata said the benches are a way to shed light on the veteran community's suicide crisis.

"Our veterans are the most important thing we have in this planet. And they've given their lives, they've given their families, to serving our country and protecting us, so we're very adamant about getting as many benches out there to get as much publicity, if you will, or knowledge that these veterans are in crisis," he said.

Among veterans, roughly 7,000 died by suicide in 2021, according to a 2023 report from the Department of Veterans Affairs. In New York, about 140 veterans died because of suicide in the same year.

The foundation provides the placards to local organizations that place them on benches in parks. Di Natale said the benches are meant to give a space for veterans to talk about their mental health.

"We've actually gotten that feedback from vets who have seen our monuments, will call us and say, 'Hey, I never told the story to my wife. I saw the bench, I sat and I told my story. And I don't know what made me do that, but your bench helped,'" Di Natale said.

The Battle Within Foundation's board is made up entirely of volunteers. Funding for the benches comes from mostly individual donations, which usually do not exceed \$50, Di Natale said.

So far, the Battle Within Foundation has also raised \$250,000 for PTSD research, according to their [website](#). The money will go toward funding a new cognitive PTSD research program at the Masonic Medical Research Institute.

Veterans can call the national suicide hotline at 988, and then press 1 to speak to a counselor with the Veterans Crisis Support Line.