



# EXPERIENCING SUICIDE

This article discusses sensitive topics that some readers may find distressing.

This month's column is the first of three columns focused on suicide risk among our colleagues, our families, and our friends. The columns will address: Experiencing Suicide - February; Comprehending Suicide - March; and Preventing Suicide - April.

**S**uicide occurs throughout Delaware and throughout the United States. Suicide victims range from lawyers, to actors and comedians, to business leaders, to our veterans,<sup>1</sup> to a bullied fourth grader, to high school students, to a Stanford women's soccer captain, and to millennials ranging from age 18 to 34.<sup>2</sup>

Peter was one of the millennials. A Tatnall graduate, he was a rising southern college senior by August 2014. He had spent the 2014 summer interning with a prominent accounting firm, a job with that firm awaited for him upon graduation. His college years included presiding in the Lacrosse Club, serving as treasurer of his fraternity, and making friends everywhere. And on and on. A popular, bright, active young man.

Peter received a tentative diagnosis of Bipolar Disorder<sup>3</sup> as his 2014 summer began. "Tentative" in the sense that the psychiatrist providing the diagnosis was only able to offer one visit before Peter left town for his summer internship, and then back to college for his final year. In other words, he was too far away to follow up. A more vigorous psychiatric assessment for Peter was essential when he returned to school.

The college, though attracting students nation-wide, had never thought to have a therapist, least of all a psychiatrist, on campus. Didn't have one even near the campus; the closest was thirty miles away from school. The distant psychiatrist's busy practice, furthermore, meant no availability for weeks after the Fall semester began. Peter made the out-of-town appointment anyway.

Whether Peter ceased using his medication once he arrived at college for senior year is not known. What is known is that,

on the night of August 24, 2014, Peter was troubled. Angry, anxious, and wildly troubled. He called his mother. He called his father. Both tried to comfort him from home. One of Peter's friends called Peter's mother; Peter's friends were worried. Peter called the emergency unit at school, asking whether he should go to a hospital. "No need," responded the emergency unit; "Come in tomorrow morning and we'll meet."

Stunning.

Peter never made that meeting. The local police found him at 5:00 a.m. Hanging from a bridge. A bridge on the campus. Police called the college administration, the college called Peter's mother. She called father. Torment and pain, torment and pain, torment and pain. The experience was just beginning.

The First and Central minister arrives and spends the day. Brutal phones call to everyone: friends, family, a grandmother, uncles and aunts, teachers and coaches, cousins, and a violin teacher. Much collapsing to the floor and weeping at the conveyed news. Neighbors charge the house with limitless foods. The Minister is fed.

Peter's brother, Malcolm, 16 years old at the time, was then and is to this day, more devastated than anyone. An injury that will never fully heal. Tears that will never fully dry. All the visiting friends and school parents and teachers and neighbors in the world do not a warm heart provide.

Peter's mother reaches a college dean that morning: "Why not — why don't you have psychiatrists on the campus?" The dean's response, never to be forgotten: "Well, we can't afford *that*." Stunning. It is not clear how much the school spent on the junior varsity basketball team that year.

“Holidays never recovered. No Christmas trees or Christmas lights anymore. How could that be done without the lost son? The memories remain, the aching endures but is slowly accepted.”

Later in the week: long train ride for father and companion, all the way to campus to retrieve Peter's car, maintained by the police, and his belongings, maintained by his fraternity brothers. Somber brothers, every one of them, dressed in suit and ties. Handshakes and introductions from all. Food set out in the (painfully cleaned) fraternity kitchen for visiting friends. The brothers did all the packing and had everything sent home.

A campus service for Peter that evening, led by the college president. Swarms of young students, wrapped in summer clothes and silence. Large-sized photos of Peter all throughout. A video made and shared with father.

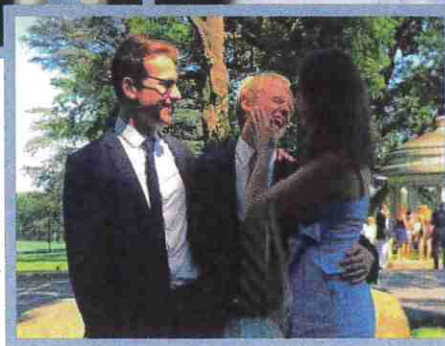
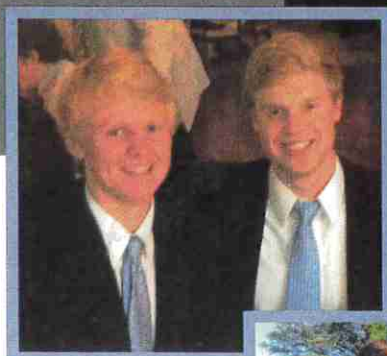
Breakfast the next morning for father and half a dozen of Peter's school friends, at the group's favorite diner, just around the corner from the campus. A release for all.

At about the same time, back in Wilmington, the funeral home on Route 202 sent a car to bring Peter home. The horrific picture in one's mind is of Peter, put in a box or a bag, dropped in the car, bumping along in the car for six hours on I-95, alone, abandoned, helpless. No one to ease his journey.

Peter's family viewed Peter's dressed body before he was turned to ashes, ashes buried at the foot of his grandparents' grave, in the Newark Union Cemetery.

That same day: A service at the Marvin Theater at Tatnall. All 471 seats taken. Friends of Peter and Malcolm and their parents, friends and family of mother and father, teachers and administrators, Peter's football team handing out programs. The school choir and two violinists, an intense address by the First and Central minister. Done in an hour or two; everyone dispersed, face up and heart heavy.

It didn't end, it doesn't end. Mothers of Malcolm's friends camped at Malcolm's home for days afterward. Holidays never recovered. No Christmas trees or Christmas lights anymore. How could that be done without the lost son? The



ABOVE: Portrait of Peter.

ABOVE LEFT: Peter and Malcolm.

LEFT: Malcolm at his high school graduation.

memories remain, the aching endures but is slowly accepted. Malcolm has graduated from college and has begun his career. Peter's car was hidden away until Malcolm was ready to drive. He did for a few years. He traded it last summer.

Peter's friends still reach out to Malcolm and to the college with donations in Peter's name. Two college friends of Peter's came to Malcolm's high school graduation. It feels warm to suppose that Peter's personality and love, experienced by those friends, comes with these friends and spreads through Malcolm's heart, and the hearts of all of us, every day of the year. And life continues. Hug your children. 🤝

#### Notes:

1. National Veteran Suicide Prevention, 2022 Annual Report, p.5: [S]uicide was the 13th leading cause of death among Veterans overall, and it was the second leading cause of death among Veterans under age 45.
2. Connect.UCLAhealth.org, 3/15/2022: Suicide is the second-leading cause of death among people age 15 to 24 in the United States.
3. National Institute of Mental Health Web-page, nimh.nih.gov: Bipolar disorder (formerly called manic-depressive illness or manic depression) is a mental illness that causes unusual shifts in mood, energy, activity levels, concentration, and the ability to carry out day-to-day tasks.

**Scott Godshall** is the Executive Director of the Delaware Lawyers Assistance Program and can be reached at [sgodshall@de-lap.org](mailto:sgodshall@de-lap.org).