

September 2, 2010

Backgrounder

Josh's Story

In 1999, on the evening of Friday, Aug. 6, Josh's 11-year-old sister flew into Vancouver International Airport after attending a special summer school in Israel. Her parents, Ben and Jude, had tried to get her older brother, Josh, to go with them to meet her plane.

Fifteen-year-old Josh refused. The Platzers, though disappointed, didn't insist. Their lanky, red-haired son was clinically depressed and his psychologist had suggested they give him space. So Josh, who had completed Grade 10 at Point Grey secondary school, went to his best friend's house and watched videos with friends instead.

He never came home and never saw his sister again. The boy for whom the phone never stopped ringing had hanged himself on his best friend's porch.



WHY JOSH'S STORY MATTERS

Canadian suicide rates have tripled over the last 30 years, with young males accounting for most of the rise. After road accidents, suicide is the second leading cause of death among Canadians aged 15 to 24.

Three times as many males as females die by suicide. For while females are more likely to think about it and attempt it, males are more likely to complete it.

Yet families, friends and the healthcare system do not understand enough about teen depression and suicide. Worse yet, few people want to confront the issue because it is so painful and shameful to the family of the victim.

But the Platzers agreed to speak out publicly about Josh to alert other parents to behaviors that signal when a teenager is thinking of committing suicide. They wanted to urge teens, teachers and other adults to speak up when they know a young person is

obsessed with thoughts of death. Others knew more about their son's anguish than they did, they said, and did not alert them.

By 'others', they meant doctors, psychiatrists, and the entire health care system, because Josh, like so many other teen victims of suicide, had already been diagnosed with depression and was receiving professional help. Only a month before his death, his parents had been told that Josh was not in imminent danger of suicide.

Friends also know more than parents sometimes, but there is a very strict code of confidence amongst young people, especially when it comes to revealing problems to adults. Plus, they don't always recognize the severity of the symptoms. Josh talked a lot about his funeral, but his friends did not see the danger in that sort of talk.

Teachers and school counselors also need to pay more attention to the thoughts and ideas expressed in essays and artwork, and to consider that a high number of missed classes could be due to mental distress rather than delinquency. Josh had handed in a very dark essay and wrote constantly in a "suicide diary".

Josh's story matters because the symptoms of his increasing despair were so typical. Yet those around him were unable to help because they did not recognize what was happening and they did not share the information. Josh's story matters because the work it has inspired may help another community to prevent a tragedy.

Jude Platzer will be speaking at World Suicide Prevention Day on Friday Sept. 10, 2010 at noon outside of the Vancouver Art Gallery. More information about the Josh Platzer Society can be found at www.teensuicideprevention.org

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