

The Columbus Dispatch

34 S. 3rd St., Columbus, Ohio 43215

Jan. 28, 2016

The Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics
The University of Wisconsin-Madison
Madison, WI

Judges:

A young woman shyly approached a *Dispatch* editor.

“My name is Emily,” she said in almost a whisper. “Thank you for saving my life.”

She had read “Silent Suffering,” a *Dispatch* series on suicide published Nov. 17-22. She was among more than 300 people who attended a community forum hosted by the newspaper and several partners in the wake of the series that, before publication, worried some experts, most coroners and even some of our editors. Would we sensationalize these tragedies?

The media tends to shy away from suicide, and at best has a strange relationship with it, treating most such deaths as private matters.

Media guidelines written by suicide-prevention groups warn journalists to tread lightly, because research has shown that some news accounts have led to copycats.

When three reporters – Lori Kurtzman, Jill Riepenhoff and Mike Wagner - began examining this public-health crisis, they talked to suicide-prevention experts and health-care journalism organizations for advice on covering a topic often considered taboo.

Some experts warned us to never, ever write about how victims died.

We wanted to paint a broad portrait of what was happening with Ohioans in the days and weeks leading up to their deaths. Were there lessons to be learned? Missed signs? Mental-health care failures?

To do that, we needed to review coroners’ investigative reports. We selected nine counties that represent a cross section of Ohio and asked coroners to see those records.

They didn’t make it easy. *Dispatch* reporters found them holding tight to their suicide investigatory records – as skimpy as some of them were – often appalled by requests to review details surrounding a suicide.

Among their biggest concerns was whether the newspaper would be fair to the families in how we presented the suicide cases. But reporters took every precaution to be fair, compassionate and accurate.

In the end, with state law on our side, we were able to dig deep into nearly 1,600 suicides in those counties in the past five years.

And the records themselves revealed a system that doesn’t do nearly enough to provide answers in suicide cases. Unlike homicides, which typically generate thorough investigations, the amount of time spent piecing together the mental health history of a victim and the events leading up to a suicide varies greatly among coroners. Some don’t do any investigations. Some couldn’t find all of their cases. Some had only a death certificate in the manila folder.

The shame is that experts say the detailed information from these investigations can save lives because it allows them to better understand suicide so that they can implement policies and procedures and mental-health care to prevent it.

Those records also led us to survivors — those that had lost a loved one to suicide — that illustrated key points we wanted to make.

Gingerly, the reporters began making contact with dozens of survivors. Only two families declined to participate. They applauded the project but weren't yet ready to share their stories publicly.

The vast majority welcomed the opportunity to talk about their loved one and their struggles with mental illness, addiction or personal problems. The *Dispatch* reporters made a decision not to ask about the suicide itself. Every family but one shared those graphic details.

Most families wanted it out there to show how much more anguish it caused.

The reporters also made a decision only to write about the death itself when it was relevant to the story, such as the case of the man who shot himself in front of his two children, who now suffer from PTSD.

The six-day series mixed care and sensitivity with unique research and hard-hitting findings about this silent, leading cause of death.

The newspaper invested nine months examining suicide, its toll on society and families, and a mental-health system that failed many of the 20,000 Ohioans who took their own lives since 2000.

The series showed that little is being done to combat one of the nation's leading causes of death. Stories explored the stigma surrounding suicide, the lack of access to care, the reasons people kill themselves and what we can learn from those who have attempted suicide. Survivors — those affected by the loss of a loved one — shared their raw emotions.

The community and statewide reaction to the project was overwhelming. Hundreds wrote or called *The Dispatch* to share their personal tragedies and thank the newspaper for starting the discussion. Advocates said they saw an increase in attendance at suicide-prevention support groups and increased calls to hotlines and mental-health crisis centers following the series.

Federal and state lawmakers called for more funding and other measures to improve the mental-health system. Two state lawmakers, one who lost a son to suicide, asked for bundles of reprints of the series and vowed to champion suicide prevention at the Statehouse when the session began in 2016 and when they travel Ohio giving speeches. A U.S. senator from Ohio promised to make it a national issue.

Two weeks after the series ran, *The Dispatch* learned just how significant its project had been: Hundreds packed the Ohio State University meeting room for the community forum sponsored by *The Dispatch* and its partners — Ohio State, the Columbus Foundation and the American Society of News Editors — to discuss suicide. One woman in the audience drove from Virginia. Her son, an Ohio State student, had killed himself on campus just weeks earlier.

The Dispatch also wanted to create a conversation about a topic that conventional wisdom says few want to talk about. Conventional wisdom is dead wrong.

Before, during and after the forum, reporters on the project heard story after story from people who read the series and said that it liberated them from the stigma of suicide. They talked about struggling for most of their lives with depression, wrestling with how they missed signs that a loved one was about to kill himself or how they are desperately trying to keep suicidal children alive. One woman said she was inspired to find a support group and break 19 years of silence about her son's suicide.

The healing had begun.

These people opened up because they felt a newspaper series gave them a voice and the freedom to speak about a topic that society made taboo. *The Dispatch* made a bold statement to break the silence on the first day of the series with this headline: "A top cause of death that is entirely preventable is one that we rarely discuss. That changes today."

A man who had attempted suicide several times said during the forum that "what I would like each and every one of you to know is you gave a voice to break the silence and a relief in the suffering to more than you will ever know."

