

Teenager's suicide inspires sister's activism

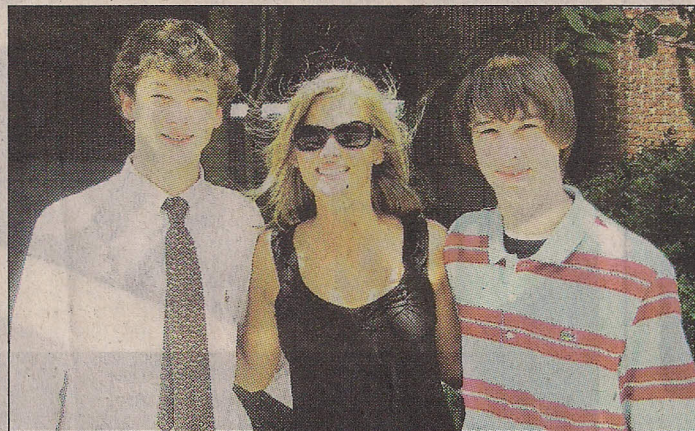
By ELIZABETH SHESTAK
Correspondent

It was a Monday afternoon in November 2009 when Victoria Bennis, then 19, learned that her youngest brother, John, had committed suicide. John was 16 and a student at Green Hope High School.

She got the call from her father while driving to a baby-sitting job and couldn't understand what had happened until she got back to her family's Cary home.

"It was very sudden and very unexpected," recalled Bennis, now 22. "I didn't even believe it until I pulled onto my street and saw all the detective cars and police cars."

Though she does not blame herself, Bennis said she wishes she had the resources that might have made a difference.



COURTESY OF VICTORIA BENNIS

Victoria Bennis with brothers Andrew, left, and John, who committed suicide in 2009. Bennis has formed Save A Life.

"I wish John could have come and talked to me," she said.

Bennis won't talk about the details of John's suicide, but she

is more than happy to chat about her efforts to keep others from having to endure the heartbreak she has learned to live with.

If you go

What: Save a Life 5K

When: Registration begins at 8 a.m. Saturday; the walk begins at 9 a.m.

Where: WakeMed Soccer Park, 201 Soccer Park Drive, Cary.

Admission: Free, but donations will be accepted.

For more: www.helpingsavealife.com

In 2010, Bennis co-founded Save A Life with Maryanne Monaco, whose son committed suicide shortly before John Bennis.

Save A Life is a teen suicide prevention program that aims to bring awareness about suicide into more schools, as well as to provide resources for those at risk or who have become "suicide survivors" – family members and friends who have lost a loved one to suicide.

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cide survivors" – family members and friends who have lost a loved one to suicide.

"Our mission is to raise awareness about the problem of teen suicide as well as educating the community about different possible solutions," Bennis said.

Save A Life has attended numerous Wake County high school orientations, and the group is hosting its third annual 5K walk on Saturday in Cary.

In the past, the event has been a fundraiser.

But it's free this year, and Bennis said she hopes that means more teens can participate.

Sessions for teens

Last year, Bennis began hosting sessions at the Bond Park Community Center for teens who needed a place to speak and be heard – to get things off their chests before issues turned into larger problems that seem inescapable.

She plans to resume the sessions next month.

Teens who attend don't have to be suicidal; rather, they appreciate a place where they can talk without fear of judgment, Bennis said.

To Bennis' knowledge, most high schools in the state have suicide response

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VICTORIA BENNIS,

ON HER BROTHER'S SUICIDE

systems in place, but many don't have much in the way of suicide prevention.

One of the few local resources is It's OK 2 Ask, a state-funded program that provides prevention programming.

Bennis completed the Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) program through It's OK 2 Ask.

Jane Miller leads the program and is a public health program consultant with the N.C. Department of Health and Human Resources.

She met Bennis at the first Save A Life 5K, which raised about \$5,000 to fund suicide-prevention training. She has been impressed with Bennis' dedication ever since.

"Usually there's a period of time when an individual needs to grieve and process a very emotional issue," Miller said. With Bennis, "it was as though she knew almost immediately when to do something to keep other people from experiencing this."

She has yet to meet anyone as young as Bennis so in-

involved in the cause.

"There are other survivors that have become colleagues, but those are older individuals," Miller said. "I haven't seen anyone as young as Victoria be as proactive."

'It's awe-inspiring'

Bennis recently graduated from N.C. State University with a degree in human biology and genetics, and she just started classes in the physician assistant program at East Carolina University.

But her efforts with Save A Life remain important to her.

She points to a number of troubling statistics released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Teen suicide is the third leading cause of death among people ages 15-24 and fourth among ages 10-14.

Teen males are four times more likely to die by suicide, while female teens are more likely to attempt suicide.

Also, the National Institute for Mental Health says that for every one suicide there are 25 attempts.

"She's trying to do as much as she can," Monaco said of Bennis. "It's awe-inspiring."

Bennis said staying busy has helped her with her grief – it's better to do something about it instead of letting it consume her.

"The biggest hurdle is learning that this is who you are," Bennis said. "This is who I am now."