

Fighting Teen Suicide: Project BRITE STAR feature

By Jeff Louderback

Fighting back tears, Sue O'Rear talks about her son Alan's love for shooting baskets and eating Wendy's sandwiches, and his dreams of attending the University of North Carolina to become an engineer or a veterinarian.

Choked with emotion, Barbara Fenter looks at a photograph of her daughter Susan, who poses on the Beaver Creek High School football field wearing a cheerleader's outfit and a beaming smile.

Five years have passed since Alan O'Rear shot and killed himself in his family's backyard and, four days later, Susan Fenter committed suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning in her family's garage.

Still dealing with grief over the tragic loss of their 16-year-old children, Sue O'Rear and Barbara Fenter formed an awareness program, visiting schools and churches to help young people learn and recognize the signs of depression and suicide. The program is called Project Brite Star (Bringing Realistic Information to Every Sensitive Teen At Risk) and is affiliated with the Light for Life Foundation of America's Yellow Ribbon Program, which was founded by the parents of a 17-year-old boy in Colorado who killed himself.

The key to the Yellow Ribbon Program is a two-sided business card. One side features the image of a yellow ribbon and a message that indicates the card carrier is seeking help. The other side contains a message intended for the receiver. This message encourages the receiver to remain with the card carrier and find the person help.

"Even when they reach their lowest point, (depressed) children do not have to say a word," O'Rear explains. "They can just hand the card to someone who will listen to them and get them help."

O'Rear and Fenter distribute the cards, which include The Community Network's 24-hour suicide hotline number (937-376-8701 or 937-426-2302), at their presentations, where they also have a display which showcases newspaper articles and information about depression awareness and suicide prevention.

Alan and Susan did not know each other. Neither did Sue O'Rear and Barbara Fenter, until they met at a support group for parents of suicide victims. On a mission to save lives and preserve futures, these mothers courageously confront their emotions to spread a message they believe is vital.

"When Susan died, I doubted whether I would be able to survive the pain, but I did not want any of her friends to make the same decision," Barbara Fenter explains. "Each day is still a struggle for both of us, and talking about what we have been through and still

endure is tough, but we know the importance of what we are saying outweighs the heartache we feel inside.

"We want these young people to know what depression is, and that it is a treatable illness." Fenter says. "If someone did the same for Alan and Susan, perhaps they would have seen hope and sought help. Maybe they would still be here."

Instead, the emotional turmoil Alan and Susan felt led them to end their promising lives.

On a Friday afternoon, Alan O'Rear walked from the bus stop and up the driveway of his family's Beaver creek home - passing the basketball goal where he loved to imitate players from his favorite college basketball team.

Inside, the sophomore honor roll student pried the locks of his father's carefully guarded firearm case and pulled out a gun. He then walked to the backyard and shot himself.

The next morning - March 4, 1995 - O'Rear died in the intensive care unit at Miami Valley Hospital, where friends and loved ones held a 14-hour vigil hoping his life would be saved.

Four days later - on the same day of O'Rear's funeral - cheerleader, student council member and accomplished piano player Susan Fenter returned home at night after spending time with friends. Her father was away on business and her mother was at a bridge game.

The vibrant and popular Fenter, an honor roll student herself, placed frozen shrimp on the counter to thaw, fed her cat Dusty and walked into the garage. She then climbed into her car, turned the ignition and read a suicide prevention pamphlet she received at school.

Three hours later, Barbara Fenter pulled into the driveway, opened the garage door and smoke billowed out. She found her daughter slumped in the driver's seat, dead of carbon monoxide poisoning - the pamphlet by her side. On her bed, next to a list of "final things to do," Susan left a suicide note.

Moments in everyday life remind O'Rear of her son's favorite things.

"Every time I go past Wendy's, I cry because that was his favorite place to eat. And I try not to look at food items that Alan liked in the grocery store because the emotions are often too difficult to control," O'Rear softly says. "There are lots of little things that remind me of him, and remind me of how much I miss him."

The deaths of O'Rear and Fenter stunned the community, which also saw a 13-year-old boy take his life the same school year. Twenty years ago, Beaver creek was a sparsely populated township with rolling fields dotted with farmhouses and barns. Today, it is a growing city dominated by shopping centers, parks and movie theaters. The school system is heralded for its academic reputation, athletic prowess and bubbling spirit.

Shouldn't children here occupy their time and thoughts cheering for the football team on Friday nights, cramming for mid-terms and finals and hanging out at the mall on weekends rather than finding themselves buried so deep in despair that they take their own lives?

Teenagers who commit suicide do not think about the finality of death and the lifetime of anguish they will leave for the loved ones left behind, Fenter believes. They just want to escape the pain, and they believe that ending their lives is the only option. As Cherie Bagadoing Fenter, Susan's older sister, wrote in a letter read at the funeral, teenagers tend to magnify their problems. Later in life, love is not as intense, nor is failure so devastating and hopelessness so deep.

"I'm sorry I won't get to go to your wedding, and I'm sorry I won't get to be an aunt to your children," Cherie writes. "I'm sorry you didn't know that life gets so much better after your teenage years. I'm so sorry I couldn't help you find a better way out."

The O'Rears and Fenters saw no warning signs that their children were troubled inside. It was not until after the deaths, when they learned more about depression, that the families recalled subtle signs that all was not well.

The night before he shot himself, Alan talked about attending a Cranberries concert that April. A half-filled job application was found in his room with high school textbooks and a guide to four-year colleges. Though Alan did not attend basketball tryouts the fall before - he played freshman basketball the previous year - he hoped to make the team as a junior.

The night before Susan died, she shopped for a prom dress and attended a college fair, where she requested information from numerous colleges, which mailed literature for months after the suicide. The day of her death, she played the piano for her friends after they returned from a hiking trip. Softball season was approaching, and Susan appeared excited about the team's chances. In the school hallways, she walked hand-in-hand with the boy she had dated for a month.

"In many cases, you can see warning signs in teenagers who are contemplating suicide, such as abrupt changes in personality, neglect of academic work, loss of interest in activities and withdrawal from friends and family," O'Rear says. "We did not notice drastic changes in the way Alan behaved."

"After he died, though, his friends told us he was crying at his 16th birthday party and he expressed feelings of worthlessness," O'Rear adds. "And, on the day he died, his girlfriend ended their relationship. His friends told us he did not speak to anyone all day at school, and he was quiet and distant on the bus ride home."

Fenter also learned that her daughter was not always the vivacious teenager she appeared to be. Six months before she died, Susan and a group of girls attended a sleepover at a friend's house, where she swallowed a bottle of aspirin.

"The next morning, one of the girls called and ask me to pick Susan up because she was so sick she could not drive," Fenter explains. "She had a history of ear infections, but I was puzzled because she was not sick the day before.

"I took her to the urgent care clinic and doctors diagnosed her with vertigo and an ear infection. She came home and remained in bed for four days before going back to school," Fenter says. "After Susan died, her friends told me what really happened at the sleepover. Apparently, Susan promised her friends she would not do anything 'so stupid' again, so the girls who knew about the incident kept it to themselves."

Fenter insists she is not angry at Susan's friends for withholding information that would have indicated the torment Susan felt. Susan is the one who decided to take her life, Fenter adds. When she talks to a group of children, Susan's mother implores them to seek help from a trusted adult if they know someone who has hinted suicide.

"Many kids will not tell if a friend is showing signs of depression because they are worried their friend will get upset," Fenter says. "Likely, their friend will be angry, but that friend will eventually forgive you and likely thank you. It is better to have a friend angry and alive rather than having to stand in front of a headstone and beg that person for forgiveness because you did not say anything."

Months before her first suicide attempt and months leading to her death, Susan recorded her feelings on paper. A journal, written by Susan and found after her death, describes her afflicted soul.

"My life is just one big nightmare. I can't get over how stupid I am," Susan wrote five months before the suicide. "Maybe I'm book smart, but I sure can't handle the things I feel inside....I think I'm going to die of a broken heart....No one can understand how I'm feeling...I can't deal with this anymore, with this pain and hurting I feel."

Barbara looks down for a moment as she reads the excerpt. Then she talks about the valuable tool Susan left behind.

"It is hard to read the entries, knowing that your child felt so much pain and you could not recognize it," Fenter says. "Reading what she wrote grabs the attention of anyone we talk to.

"Hopefully, children who need help will hear the journal excerpts and identify with what Susan felt," she adds. "Then after listening to everything we tell them, they recognize there is help. There is an option other than suicide that will help them stop feeling this way."

Project Brite Star is supported by Beavercreek City Schools and the Community Network. O'Rear and Fenter originally spoke to groups in Beavercreek, the community that was stricken with a teen suicide epidemic in the mid-1990s. Now they appear before schools and church groups across the Dayton area..

"We would like to attract more speakers - family members and friends who have lost loved ones to suicide," Fenter says. "Time constraints will not permit us to make presentations all over the Dayton area, but we are looking for volunteers to represent Project Brite Star (and the Yellow Ribbon Program) at different schools in each part of the Miami Valley."

Fenter and O'Rear have made as many as 11 presentations in a week, which has left the pair emotionally drained. There are moments when tears fall and voices choke, yet they take a breathe and continue, knowing the power of the message they are delivering.

"For months, when I stood in front of Alan's headstone, I asked God what I could do to help stop these needless deaths," O'Rear says. "We cannot bring our children back, but we can do all we can to make sure other children don't take their lives and other families aren't left with a lifetime of grieving. The loss of your child, I think, is the worst pain you could experience."

As the months pass, O'Rear and Fenter lean on each other and their respective families to manage their sorrow. The speeches given and the Yellow Ribbon cards distributed through Project Star provides a source of therapy for both mothers, whose children never realized their dreams.

Fenter would like to erase the image of seeing her daughter slumped over in the family car, but she can't. She sometimes envisions herself opening the garage door and saving Susan, then reality returns.

"I had a dream once that Susan came back. I looked at her, and she did not say anything. I put my arms around her and did not let go," Fenter says, her voice wavering. "Then I woke up, laid there for a moment, and then once again realized she was gone."

