

A Secret Best Not Kept

By Dara Berger

Up until the day my mother killed herself, I was like any other teen-aged girl. I was concerned with what to wear to the school dance and whether the boy who sat next to me in Algebra liked me. After my mom's death, my concerns became more serious and very basic to my life: Who is going to pick me up after soccer practice? Who will feed me dinner? Who will take me to buy my first prom dress? Who will be at my high school graduation?

I remember thinking right after my mom died, if I can just get through this, things will be okay. I soon learned that the period of grieving for my mom would not be the hardest part. The days and weeks and years following her death proved to be the most difficult, because no one ever talked about her. Not my brother, not my father, not the neighbors — not even her friends! This powerful silence fueled the making of my documentary film, *A Secret Best Not Kept*.

I had been silent too long, and it was time to tell my story.

When I had first decided to make the film, I had no idea how much it would change my life. This is in part due to the many wonderful and loving people I met, many of whom I continue to have a relationship with today. Until I met these other survivors of suicide, I never understood how many people had suffered the same way I did.

Meeting these people was truly a gift for me. I was able to listen to their all-too-familiar stories and feelings, which made me feel that I was not alone. Each time I interviewed another survivor, I was also able to share my own story. This helped me come to peace with my mom's suicide. There is nothing quite like connecting with someone who shares the same life experiences as you. It begins the healing process.

One of the most important things I took from the film is the importance of speaking with others about your loss.

It was at my first conference for the American Association of Suicidology in Bethesda, MD that I learned many survivors get involved in the cause as part of their healing process. They write books, sing songs, raise money and awareness, and advocate for better resources on behalf of those with mental illness. Their work inspired how I put the film together.

Throughout the film, I met members from many of these organizations including AFSP, AAS, NAMI, SPAN, The Samaritans and The Kristin Brooks Hope Center. The members of these organizations work tirelessly, lobbying to

effect changes regarding mental illness, to destigmatize mental illness and to provide education and support for families and loved ones.

I also had the opportunity to interview leading healthcare professionals, including the former Surgeon General of the United States, David Satcher, New York Presbyterian Hospital President, Dr. Herbert Pardes and the Chief of Neuroscience for the NYS Psychiatric Institute Dr. John Mann. These doctors explained in detail all aspects of the disease of depression, and that it is an actual illness. This helped me to accept that my mother's death was not anyone's fault. Not her doctor's fault, not my father's fault, and not the fault of any of her friends. My mom suffered from a mental illness, depression for many years, which untreated ultimately led to her death by suicide.

I know that not everyone can be saved, but I do believe that many lives can with the proper intervention, and support system. I made the film to help

stimulate dialogue about suicide, raise consciousness, and reduce the stigma associated with mental illness. This way, people suffering from depression can feel more comfortable talking about their feelings, which will encourage them to come forward to get the help they need.

My hope is also that through education and understanding, other families will not make the same mistakes my family did, by never talking about my mom and just pretending she and her suicide didn't exist. I wasn't just robbed of my mom; I was also robbed of sharing the memories about her, too.

I have gotten so much from making this film that it would be very difficult to point to any one thing and say what has helped me the most. I know that I am not and can never be the same person I was before my mom's suicide. Now I can proudly say that I am not, and will never be the same person I was before I produced this film. Throughout the whole experience, my husband and I always commented to each other, if this film helps only one person, it will be well worth the effort. I just never dreamed that I might be that person.

A DVD or VHS copy of "A Secret Best Not Kept," a documentary about surviving suicide, why people complete suicide and the suicide prevention movement, is available free of charge to NAMI-NYS affiliates. Affiliate presidents should call Rachel Greco at the NAMI-NYS office, 1-800-950-3228. More information about the movie may be found at www.sayitoutloud.com. Ms. Berger is available to speak about the movie at screenings.



Dara Berger at the opening ceremonies for "Out of the Darkness," Where thousands of suicide survivors walked all night in memory of their loved ones.