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A Brighter Day provides resources for teens struggling with depression and thoughts of suicide

By Vera Kochan



Jake Kallen, in 2013 Photo courtesy Elliot Kallen

In January 2015, Lafayette resident and founder of A Brighter Day, Elliot Kallen and his wife Tammy, got the kind of news that is every parent's worst nightmare. Their son Jake, 19, died by suicide while away at college at the University of Montana.

Jake graduated from Acalanes High School in 2013, and had an easygoing personality to match his love of sports, especially hockey. His parents never suspected anything was wrong until his last month of life, and they didn't find many answers in Jake's suicide letter, other than telling them that he never felt compelled to come to them or anyone else for help. According to Kallen, most of the six-page letter was "rambling."

The month before Jake's passing, while he was back home for Christmas break during his sophomore year, Kallen recalled an unsettling comment that his son made. Jake admitted that he had thoughts of suicide while he was in high school. Asked whether he wanted to talk about it, he said that he was over it. "I didn't think much about it," stated Kallen, "because it didn't seem like a problem anymore."

However, Kallen began to notice that his son stopped looking him in the eye. And, while giving each other a hug goodbye before his trip back to college, "He, again, didn't look me in the eye and gave me a weak hug." Something that was uncharacteristic of Jake.

After Jake left, Kallen's intuition began to kick in, and he decided to fly to Montana and spend a quality weekend with him. It was at this point that Jake stopped taking calls from his dad. Kallen recalls that Jake's last words to his mother were, "Mom, I want you to know that I'm at peace now." He had couriered his suicide letter to his

parents, who received it approximately 12 hours after he died by walking onto an interstate highway in the middle of the night and being hit by a truck.

"His tox screen came back clean," Kallen recalled. "Jake didn't do that kind of stuff."

Still in shock, Kallen and his wife flew to Montana to collect Jake's body and were touched to see that his classmates had erected a small memorial along the side of the road. "Looking back, you do see the signs that you never noticed before."

It was during the flight home that Kallen decided to do something so that no other parent had to live through this type of loss. "I wanted to channel this experience into something positive." And so, A Brighter Day, a 501(c) (3), was born with the intent to "unite depression and stress resources with teenagers."

A Brighter Day's mission is to be "a relentless force in stopping teen suicide by providing educational resources on mental health and parenting." The nonprofit accomplishes this by hosting community events and virtual support groups, offering crisis intervention and therapy partnerships, and providing valuable information through its article center and website.

Kallen feels it's important for parents to make time, even after a busy day of work, to talk to their children and get involved in their lives. "Kids are bombarded with negative stuff every day. Parents need to have them turn off their cell phones at the dinner table and talk."

According to the Pew Research Center, 1 in 5 teens will experience depression this year and suicide remains a leading cause of death in youth, ages 10-24. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention states that every year tens of thousands of teens struggle with thoughts of depression, sadness, isolation and suicide.

Symptoms of teen depression, according to A Brighter Day, include: sad or depressed mood, crying; feelings

of worthlessness or hopelessness; loss of interest in things they used to enjoy; withdrawal from friends and family; inability to sleep, or sleeping too much; loss of appetite, or increased appetite; aches and pains that don't go away, even with treatment; irritability; feeling tired despite getting enough sleep; inability to concentrate; and thoughts of suicide, talk of suicide, or suicide attempts.

A Brighter Day's website offers teens the opportunity to download a "Teen Survival Tool Kit," and parents can download a "Parent Resource Tool Kit." It also encourages calling 211 for Immediate Emergency Services or 1-800-273-8255 for the National Suicide Prevention Hotline. Teens experiencing a mental health crisis can also text BRIGHTER to 741741 for free, unlimited support where they will be contacted within 5 minutes by a licensed professional with complete anonymity.

In order to get the word out to teens about their organization, A Brighter Day started an event called "Teen Band Showcase" where local bands perform while being judged by music professionals on both quality and the number of attendees they manage to draw. Winners can receive a \$1,000 scholarship and attendees are given drawstring backpacks containing A Brighter Day information and resources. "At the end of each concert," said Kallen, "we've never seen our informational brochures on the floor or in the trash."

Kallen wants parents to know that A Brighter Day can arrange and pick up the tab for teens to get immediate professional help via Zoom, rather than having to wait weeks to get an appointment for a therapist. He's also working to disseminate information across the country by making A Brighter Day's resources available nationwide. On a local level, he'd like the area's high schools to help get the word out.

As to the future, A Brighter Day's vision is to "improve the lives of parents and teens struggling with mental health to ultimately create a world where teen suicide is no longer an epidemic in this country."

For more information visit www.abrighterday.org or to contact Elliot Kallen: elliott@abrighterday.info or call (510) 206-1103.

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