

The statistics are startling. Every 18 minutes, someone in the United States commits suicide ... Suicide is the third leading cause of death among teens ... 24 percent of high school students have seriously thought about attempting suicide. For teenager Brandon Garland, anguished thoughts became reality.



Out of the DARKNESS

IT IS ESTIMATED THAT 20 million people will suffer from depression each year, and of those, 30,000 will die by suicide. Many people don't realize that depression is a serious brain illness. Those suffering from depression may be unable to get themselves the help they so desperately need. Quite often, untreated depression leads to suicide, which results from complex interactions between biological, psychological, social, and environmental factors.

Suicide evokes difficult and uncomfortable reactions in most people. Too often, victims are blamed and surviving friends and family members are stigmatized. Consequently, suicide is shrouded in secrecy. This limits the amount of

available information that is crucial to suicide prevention.

Eric Garland, a member of National Mutual Benefit and a home office employee, lost his only son, Brandon, to suicide on February 15, 2006. When he first learned of Brandon's death, he vowed there would be no cover-up and has spoken freely of his family's harrowing, life-changing experience. Eric is determined to educate others about depression and its link to suicide.

Brandon Dean Garland, age 18, had a huge circle of friends and enjoyed everything and anything that had to do with country music, hunting, fishing, snowmobiling, and sports. One of Brandon's life-long friends described him as "a

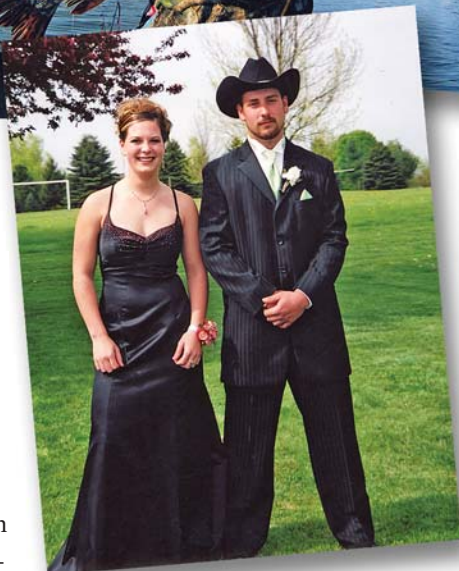
really good, outgoing guy—really fun to be around."

It was Brandon's love of sports that ultimately led to his decline and death. After receiving two concussions, one in a snowmobiling accident and another while playing rugby, Brandon was never the same guy again. Suddenly he had concentration and short-term memory problems. Garland says of his son, "He went from a smart kid with an A/B average and a gifted athlete, to someone who could no longer participate in sports, and who struggled with his schoolwork."

Brandon was devastated. He withdrew from his many friends and started hanging out with people who weren't at all like him. Having moved out of the



ABOVE: The Garland family—Eric, Brittny, Trudy, and Brandon—enjoy an Alaskan Cruise in September 2001. RIGHT: Trudy's favorite picture of Brandon is one taken while he was fishing on Lake Waubesa. Brittny's favorite is of herself and Brandon dressed up for prom.



family home, Brandon was adrift. He refused to take phone calls from anyone. He didn't take his meds. He had no job. He was barely in school. He was drinking. And in the last four to six weeks of his life, he turned to cocaine.

Being the athlete that he was prior to the concussions, Brandon had always despised anything that had to do with drugs. But in those last weeks of his life, he turned to what he had once scorned to dull his mental anguish.

Brandon had been prescribed the

SUICIDE HELP LINE

If you or someone you know is having thoughts of suicide, contact the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255). It is a 24-hour, toll-free service available to anyone in suicidal crisis. Callers are routed to the closest possible of over 120 crisis centers across the country. All calls are free and confidential. Visit www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org for more information about the organization and its services.

antidepressant Zoloft, but because of the stigma of taking drugs for depression, he didn't want treatment. He felt that if he needed medication for depression then he must be crazy.

The perceived shame associated with mental illness and substance abuse prevents many people, especially teens, from seeking help; they fear prejudice and discrimination. It is that social stigma that needs to be changed or—better yet—eliminated. Eric's hope is to lessen the stigma of depression, stating, "Depression is a real disease, just like cancer or heart disease. It doesn't mean someone is crazy. People are scared of depression; scared to talk about it."

Education about depression and suicide prevention needs to be brought to the forefront, and Eric Garland, his wife, Trudy, and daughter, Brittny, have become deeply involved in these efforts, not only in their community of McFarland, Wisconsin, but also through their participation in a national event called *Out of the Darkness Overnight*.

A 20-mile walk through the night,

from dusk until dawn, *Out of the Darkness Overnight* brings together friends, family members, and loved ones whose lives have been touched by suicide or depression, and gives them a way to turn their heartbreak into hope for tomorrow. It's a unique opportunity to help shed light on suicide, its impact, and its prevention.

On August 12-13, 2006, 1,200 participants walked along the lakeshore in Chicago, Illinois. Another 1,200 participants walked in San Francisco July 22-23, 2006. The walkers in both of these cities combined raised over \$3.6 million, before expenses, with donations continuing to come in every day. The net pro-

ceeds benefit the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP), to fund research, education, survivor, and awareness programs—both to prevent suicide and to assist those affected by suicide.

Brandon's mother, Trudy, says, "I was overwhelmed by all the people who are affected by suicide, by their eagerness to support others and the AFSP."

In order to participate in the walk each participant pledged to raise at least \$1,000. Together, the eight members of team "Bear With Us," (Griz was Brandon's nickname) raised \$13,000 for depression

Eric and his family were especially touched by a group of teenagers, unknown to the Garlands, who stepped up and busied the tables. "People wanted to help. This dinner turned out to be a whole community effort," relates Eric.

Why are the Garlands so passionate about this cause? "Because we are survivors of suicide ... we lost a son, brother, student, and friend to suicide," states Brandon's father. "Brandon suffered from depression and chose to take his own life. We have been forever changed by his death. Our normal is gone forever;



Old friends and new acquaintances join together to support depression awareness and suicide prevention during the 2006 *Out of the Darkness Overnight* walk in Chicago, Illinois. Pictured from left to right are: Kelly Phelps, Danita Dostalek, Brittney Garland, Eric Garland, Mark McLaughlin, and Jim Depor. Brandon's mother, Trudy, who is not pictured, was serving as a volunteer at the event.

awareness and suicide prevention programs. Their fund-raising efforts started with donation boxes in community businesses and schools and culminated with a spaghetti supper, which alone raised \$6,200.

"It was a really neat night," Eric recalls. "We sold 425 tickets ahead of time and served an additional 300 walk-ins. There were more people at the dinner that we didn't know than we did know."

we have to find a new normal, however long that takes."

When people ask how the Garlands are doing, their typical answer is "okay." But Eric sadly states, "The truth is that we are not okay, and it is almost impossible to ever imagine being okay again. As deeply as I love my family, I have come to learn that love alone is not a match for the power and strength of depression." ♦

Symptoms of Major Depression

- Physical symptoms that don't respond to treatment and persist after all medical reasons have been ruled out
- Persistent unhappiness, negativity, irritability, sad or empty mood
- Uncontrollable anger or outbursts of rage
- Overly self-critical, unwarranted guilt, low self-esteem
- Slowed or hesitant speech or body movements, or restlessness (anxiety)
- Loss of interest in once pleasurable activities
- Low energy, chronic fatigue, sluggishness
- Disturbances in sleeping and eating patterns, including bulimia or anorexia
- Thoughts of suicide, suicide plans or attempts

Not all people with depression will show all symptoms or have them to the same degree. If a person has four or more symptoms for more than two weeks, a medical doctor or a psychiatrist should be consulted. Remember that only a medical doctor can diagnose depression.

Warning Signs of Suicide

- Talking about suicide
- Statements about hopelessness, helplessness, or worthlessness
- Preoccupation with death
- Suddenly happier, calmer
- Loss of interest in things one cares about
- Visiting or calling people one cares about
- Making arrangements; setting one's affairs in order
- Giving things away

A suicidal person urgently needs to see a doctor or psychiatrist!