

Suicide's legacy: A father's struggle

One year after daughter took her life, Richard Blackwell shares what he has learned.



Richard Blackwell and daughter Alex shared a close bond.

CONTRIBUTED BY THE BLACKWELL FAMILY

BY FIZA PIRANI THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

ONLY IN THE AJC SUICIDE PREVENTION

One year after losing his teen daughter to suicide, Richard Blackwell is learning to laugh again.

Sixteen-year-old Alex Blackwell died in September 2017, after a yearlong struggle with social anxiety and depression, inflamed by back-to-back sports concussions and extensive leg surgery. The Atlanta-journal-Constitution shared Alex's story in a Personal Journey earlier this year.

The rosy-cheeked girl with striking blue eyes was beloved for her wicked sense of humor and spontaneity. Her sudden death, the result of an intentional overdose, left a dent in the Blackwells' close-knit Tucker community and at Greater Atlanta Christian School, where Alex played soccer.

"She was the best adventure of my life," said Seth Masters, Alex's boyfriend.

It was two months after Alex's death before Blackwell and his wife, Kim, spent a day without tears; six months before there were more days without tears than with them.

On the one-year anniversary of her death last month, neighbors placed luminaries around the Blackwell's home. The couple spent the stormy night eating sushi and drinking a couple beers before going to bed. Blackwell said they awoke the next morning and felt "like a type of burden had lifted up and off."

"Everybody seemed to think the year was the magic point," Blackwell said. "And it's true. It's amazing what a year will do and allow you to recover from. "

Recognizing depression To help heal from Alex's death and to help parents of other teens suffering from depression, Blackwell focused his energy on depression awareness. He began curating and circulating a detailed checklist for parents to identify signs of depression and improve verbal communication with their children.

But as time passed, he grew concerned by the growing suicide rate. The number of suicides among 15- to 19-year-old girls has doubled between 2007 and 2015, reaching a 40-year high, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Blackwell decided to shift his attention from learning the signs of depression to educating himself on treatments for depression.

He was fueled, in part, by his own downward spiral.

"I had never suffered from depression and questioned why it was so difficult to overcome," Blackwell wrote in an email to friends and family four days before the anniversary of Alex's death. "Yet in the weeks following Alex's death, I felt that if it were not for Kim and (daughter) Grayson I may not have had the will to continue."

It wasn't until Blackwell lost his mother to cancer in April that he recognized he was fighting depression himself.

Any progress Blackwell made since Alex's death seemed to evaporate.

"I lost all self-confidence in my abilities," Blackwell said. "I felt that the world was against me, and that every little thing went wrong."

He experienced loss of energy and felt powerless to complete menial tasks like sorting the mail, taking a shower or even eating - all things he experienced after losing Alex.

Blackwell had read so much about depression since his daughter's death, he knew the symptoms by heart. But like many survivors of loss, he attributed his feelings of sadness and restlessness to grief, not depression.

The epiphany came one day in May, as Blackwell sat reflecting on the past year.

"I remember thinking, 'You know, I wasn't like this a month ago.' And I looked at Kim and saw she wasn't affected the way I was."

Blackwell set a goal for July 1 to begin turning things around. "I'm getting out of this," he told himself. "I'm not staying here."

He began taking the advice he'd shared with others in blog posts and texts to loved ones suffering their own battles. He adjusted his diet, starting with a vitamin regimen focused on emotional clarity, and made time for exercise after months of neglecting his physical health. And he went back to being a Georgia Soccer referee, a position he'd held for 10 years.

"I didn't want to do any of it," Blackwell said. "I didn't want to be a participant of life." But he knew what he needed to do.

Blackwell was lucky. With the help of behavioral therapy, he was able to pull himself out of his depression, but many sufferers lack access to affordable mental health care. Someone with a chemical imbalance due to brain injury or chronic illness - or someone stuck too deep in their own trauma - may not have had the ability to get the appropriate professional help.

One year after losing Alex, Blackwell sees depression "for the soul-sucking affliction it is. It doesn't matter where it comes from, it's there."

Depressed or not, Blackwell is still mourning, and he works to manage that as best he can.

"We have a rule," Blackwell said. "We only watch comedies in this house."

A renewed vision

Following a string of 14 suicides among Georgia youth within a two-month period last year, the AJC asked GBI Director Vernon Keenan for an explanation.

"We don't know what's happening," he said. "It's all over the place."

Some experts point to social media, online bullying or the overwhelming pressure to succeed both academically and socially for the high suicide rate among teens. Others blame easy access to firearms, which accounted for 43 percent of youth suicides in 2016, according to the CDC.

“But nobody wants to talk about this stuff. They don’t want to upset the family,” said Keenan. “I don’t think the media wants to talk about it. How do you have a public discussion if no one talks about it?” Blackwell wants to talk about this stuff. And he has been.

In fact, he’s met with hundreds of people in schools, hospitals and churches over the last year, he said.

“Alex didn’t die of suicide. She died of depression,” Blackwell told a group of women during a recent talk at the Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic School in Druid Hills. “That’s what we have to change. You all have to share with all of your friends your experiences with your children, and share those as often as possible, because we don’t do that now. We don’t talk about these things.”

In an effort to spread his message, Blackwell asks everyone to pass his name on to anyone that will allow him to come talk to any group of any size - even if it means driving up to Chattanooga to speak with four people, as he’s done this year.

“Ten minutes is all I need,” he said. His goal is to increase awareness about depression, and that goes beyond simply knowing the symptoms. It’s about seeking solutions that help manage the symptoms before they lead to suicide.

To that end, Blackwell reads everything he can about the front lines of depression research, from the identification of genes that may play a critical role in depression to treatments using electro convulsion therapy and the club drug ketamine.

Blackwell shares his research on depression, as well as his experience grieving for his daughter, on his public Linked In page at www.linkedin.com/in/richardablackwell. And he continues to talk to anybody who will listen. That includes at a TEDx Cincinnati event next year.

“The conversations must continue,” he said.

MORE DETAILS

Richard Blackwell shares his research on depression, as well as his experience grieving for his daughter, on his public Linked In page at www.linkedin.com/in/richardablackwell, Below are two posts.

- Is your daughter ok? Check again.
- Broken: Dealing with employees, friends, and family after the loss of a loved one.

Suicide prevention

If you or anyone you know is contemplating suicide, call or text the 24-hour hotline at 800-273-8255. For more information, go to www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org.