

# Town to hold suicide summit

Four deaths this year has moved town to action



By Elisabeth Arriero

Ashley Lawson

Months before her father decided to end his life, Davidson resident Ashley Lawson had already said goodbye to the man who raised her.

He wasn't the same person anymore, she said.

The old Steve Lawson was a fun-loving man who enjoyed a good laugh and loved to take his little girl on adventures to Lowes Home Improvement Store.

But nearly four years before he committed suicide by shooting himself in the backyard of their Davidson home on Jan. 15, Lawson began to fall into a deep depression. He didn't like the lights to be on or the curtains to be open. He slept for most of the day. Sometimes, Ashley Lawson would find her father sitting in the dark in his chair, quietly sobbing.

"Dad didn't kill himself. The mental illness is what killed him," she said. "He was so depressed that he literally couldn't get out of bed in the morning. Once people get to that point – that place of darkness – they're not the same person anymore." Steve Lawson was a Navy veteran, and his family believes that his military service during the Vietnam War may have contributed to his mental illness.

Lawson's suicide was the first of four this year in the town of Davidson. The deaths shocked this close-knit town and led residents and town leaders to create a committee on suicide.

On Nov. 3, that committee is inviting the public to attend its suicide prevention and awareness summit on the town green.

"We're a small community, and we truly care about helping each other in times of need," said town spokeswoman Cristina Shaul. "We want people to know it's OK to talk about suicide and that if someone is showing signs, it's OK to bring it up and offer help."

Although Davidson's high number of suicides is a one-year spike, it is four times the national rate for suicides. In 2011 there were two, and in 2010 there was one.

The suicide prevention and awareness steering committee, made up of nearly 20 members, was created to raise awareness about suicides in the community to help prevent additional suicides.

Lawson, who is now a member of the steering committee, said she initially found it difficult to tell people about her father's severe depression and the ultimate cause of his death.

After all, she said, her parents came from a generation that didn't openly discuss such things. And she didn't know how friends and co-workers would take the news.

It's not just the Baby Boomer generation that has a hard time talking about suicide.

Jeremy Cramarossa, a senior at Hough High School, said he felt the need to start a dialogue about suicide after a fellow classmate committed suicide earlier this year.

"Not a lot of people want to talk about it, but that's the problem – people need to start talking about it," said Cramarossa, who is another member of the town's suicide prevention and awareness steering committee.

Tom Gettelman, another member of the steering committee and a vice president at CMC-Randolph, said that while people have gradually become more comfortable with talking about mental illness, suicide still carries with it significant stigma.

"A lot of people don't have a knowledge of what mental illness really looks like because they think it's based on ... the more sensationalized displays they see in the movies," said Gettelman. "People think of the Hannibal Lectors and the mass murderers.... They think everyone with a mental illness is going to be like that, and that's not even close to being true."

Members of the committee hope the Gathering on the Green event will encourage residents to seek resources and help if they or someone they know are suicidal.

"We didn't know about advocates at the time. My poor mother was just trying to do the best she could," said Lawson. "The number one mistake when someone is taking care of someone who is depressed is trying to do it all yourself."

During the event, there will be several speakers and music. There will also be suicide prevention resources available for residents.

Gathering on the Green is just the beginning, said Shaul. Starting in January, the committee will start providing free suicide prevention training around town, which will tell residents how to talk with someone who may be suicidal, what signs to look for and where to seek help.

Lawson said she hopes the outreach campaign will help prevent another family from going through the kind of pain her family went through.

"It's difficult to talk about it but somebody has to," she said. "If people just keep on not talking about it, if people don't tell people that it's OK to find an advocate, it's OK to seek help, it's OK to find an outside opinion, then history is going to keep repeating itself."

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