

# Fathers breaking the silence on suicide

*Fire chief, former police officer encourage families to be open about their struggles*

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Pat Kenny's son Sean struggled with depression for most of his life before he intentionally overdosed on June 3, 2006.

Kenny kept that secret for most of the time he worked at the Hinsdale Fire Department. The former Hinsdale fire chief realizes

that was a mistake.

"In terms of sharing it, I would do it so much differently," said Kenny, who worked in Hinsdale for 24 years and is now director of fire and emergency medical services in Western Springs. "I would have gone to the kitchen table (at the fire station) when he was diagnosed at 5 with clinical depression and shared it.

"I also would have created the environment in the fire house where people would have felt if they had an issue, they could come forward, too," he added.

Kenny has been spreading that message to fellow firefighters since 2009, when he first presented the program he named after his son.

The talk grew out of an article he wrote for Fire Chief magazine earlier that year. Kenny never intended to write or speak about his experience, but he soon discovered firefighters needed to hear what he had to say.

"I could look around and I could tell who in the room had been touched by suicide just by the way they looked at me," he said. "It was almost like I could see in their soul."

Firefighters are particularly hesitant to share anything that might make them look weak in their colleague's eyes. But ignoring the pain caused by the mental illness of a family member or one's self can be dangerous, Kenny said. No one can be a superhero all the time. "You have to take cape off," he said. "We wear the cape all the time. I've got to save people. My job is to come to you on your worst day. I can't have a bad day. You continue to wear the cape until the cape chokes you and you can no longer perform."

Kenny remembers when he was still trying to wear the cape the first month after Sean had died. He had to reprimand a firefighter who didn't show up for mandatory duty for the village's Fourth of July celebration.

Kenny called the firefighter into his office and was ready to deal with him harshly. Then he heard Sean's voice.

"I heard him loud since the first time he died and he said, 'Dad, you need to look up.'"

Kenny listened. And when he looked up, he saw a broken man sitting in front of him.

"He was at the brink of suicide," Kenny said.

The firefighter had the courage to talk about his situation because the conversation about suicide at the fire house already had

begun.

"For a month at the kitchen table everybody had talked about Sean," Kenny said. "To this day, he says, 'That saved my life.'"

Police officers face a similar situation, said Mark Tobias, whose daughter, Chrissy (profiled in last week's paper) attempted suicide three times before she found her way to recovery in 2012.

Mark said he and his wife, Fran, had a very open relationship with their daughter. And yet Chrissy chose to keep her struggles a secret from Mark, who worked as a police officer in the town where they lived.

"She worried about my reputation in the community if people found out," Mark said. "I totally understand where she was coming from, and that stigma has existed for years."

Chrissy said she remembers her father, after he learned about her first suicide attempt, asking why she hadn't told him how she was feeling.

"I was scared it was going to ruin my dad's reputation as a police officer if people found out his kid had a mental illness," she said.

Confronting mental illness in his personal life was dramatically different than his experiences with as an officer, Mark said.

"We deal with people with mental illness on the street, but that ended when we got them to hospital. It didn't continue on in our lives. They may get out of the hospital and have recurrences and we dealt with them again, (but) it was, 'Out of sight, out of mind,'" he said. "When it hit home, it was there every day and night."

Like Kenny, Mark was not eager to inform his co-workers of what was going on at home.

"It was hard to share," he said. "I picked and chose who I talked to. It was not something that I just went in and announced to everybody."

Mark and Fran eventually found others with whom they could talk openly through NAMI DuPage.

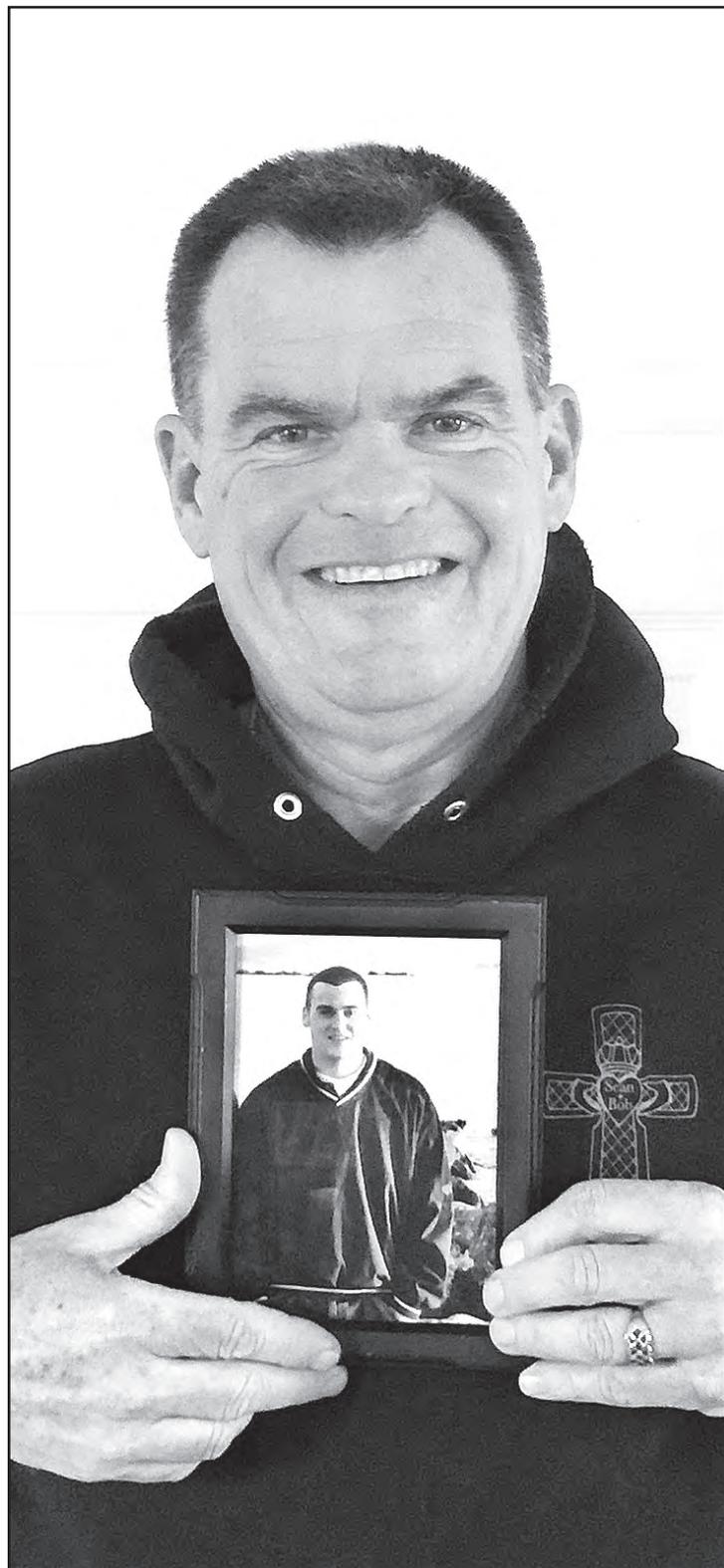
"Probably the most important one was the family-to-family classes that

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Pat Kenny got his first buzz cut in February to honor both his son Sean, who took his own life in 2006, and his wife Eileen, who was undergoing chemo for a brain tumor. Kenny has long said that had Sean been diagnosed with brain cancer rather than mental illness, he would not have been uncomfortable telling others. Now his wife has brain cancer. "I watch this flow of love and support. It's exactly what Sean should have gotten," he said. (photo provided)

they offer for family members of people with mental illness to help them understand and cope with mental illness in their family," he said. (You learned) that you weren't alone. There were other people dealing with the same or worse things than you were dealing with and there was hope."

He and Kenny are both proud of their children.

"I think she's going great," Mark said of Chrissy. "She struggles at times, but she is persistent and works very hard at her recovery and she accepts her mental illness, but doesn't let it define her."

People who suffer with mental illness in some ways are much stronger than the general public, Kenny said.

"They make a decision daily to get out of bed and stick around," Kenny said. "Most of us are blessed enough we don't have to worry about that."

Mark Tobias would like to see everyone do more to learn more about mental illness.

Don't close people out or write them off because they have mental illness," he said. "Educate yourself. Be advocates for them and understand it's not an easy recovery, but there is hope and people do recover."

Mental illness is not an indication of a person's character, Kenny said.

"He was a great kid," he said of his son. "This has nothing to do with the quality of a human being."

Many who attempt suicide are able to move into recovery and go on to do great things, Kenny said. He's seen it happen.

"Now they're doing phenomenal stuff," he said. "Many more times than not that's how it works."