

Tobias hopes her story will save lives

After years of self-injury and suicide attempts, 29-year-old is focused on recovery

By Pamela Lannom

plannom@thehinsdalean.com

Chrissy Tobias has one message for young people thinking of taking their own life.

"I just want them to know that life isn't always the way that it seems, and it's going to get better," she said.

Tobias has spent years coming to that realization herself. Sexually abused by an uncle when she was a child, she started injuring herself when she was 12 and attempted suicide for the first time in seventh grade.

"I got really sick and I got scared and I told my parents I had the flu and they didn't suspect anything different," she said. "I was back in school a few days later. The self-injury was continuing."

Tobias didn't look like she was at risk on the outside. She kept her grades up and stayed active in school. Plus her father worked for the Glen Ellyn Police Department and was the D.A.R.E. officer at her junior high school.

The bullying that started in junior high continued in high school. Tobias continued to hide behind her grades and her involvement in her church youth group.

When she went away to college, the feelings of isolation increased. So did the self-injury and suicidal thoughts.

She transferred to a college closer to home her sophomore year. One night during her junior year, her resident advisor stopped by her apartment and discovered Tobias had hurt herself badly. She was taken to the emergency room and her parents were called.

"This is when they were notified for the first time about the self-injury, and this is when I told them about the previous suicide attempt," Tobias said.

Tobias was not as up front with the doctors in the psychiatric ward, where she was kept for 72 hours. She told the doctors what she knew they needed to hear to release her: She had never hurt herself before. She had never had suicidal thoughts.

"I basically lied about everything just so they would let me go home," she said. "I wasn't dumb. I knew if I said

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I was going to hurt myself again they would keep me. I played the system to get out."

She achieved her goal of going home but was not allowed back at school.

"They said I was too much of a liability to have on campus so I wouldn't be welcomed back," she recalled. "For somebody to say, literally say, 'You are too much of a liability,' it's not really a self-esteem booster. I can't even explain just the shame I felt."

Out of school and burdened by feelings of inadequacy, Tobias found herself in a downward spiral of self-injury and increasing suicidal thoughts. Periodically she would reach out to someone before she took any action.

"This was kind of like a repetitive cycle," she said. "I'd go through the hospital. I'd come out. I'd be OK for a little while and I'd become suicidal again. I ended up in the hospital time after time and just feeling so alone."

She also made two more attempts on her life and likely would have made another, had she not heard a speaker from the National Alliance on Mental Illness, or NAMI, during one of her hospitalizations.

"Her story was really similar to mine with the aspects of the self-injury and the suicidal thoughts and actions," she said. "I really felt a connection with her. I kind of made the choice that day that I was going to work at recovery as hard as everyone else around me was working at it."

"I kind of realized at that point that the meds — and the doctors — they weren't going to fix me just because I took them," she added. "I had to work at recovery



Chrissy Tobias, shown here with mom Fran and dad Mark, said sharing the story of her previous struggles with self-injury and suicide is important. "It reminds me to keep working hard at this, because it's

something that I have to wake up every day and decide I want to do," she said. "Even when life is going well, I still have to wake up every day and choose recovery." (photo provided)

and work on my recovery if I wanted to get better."

Tobias has worked hard at her recovery. She joined a support group and started seeing a counselor. She returned to school and earned a bachelor's degree in psychology. She has a part-time job as a peer specialist for NAMI of DuPage County and is working to be certified as a recovery support specialist. She hopes to earn a graduate degree in social work or psychology one day.

That doesn't mean her life is easy or her struggles are over. She continues to take medication, go to counseling and have electroconvulsive therapy to help with her depression, anxiety and borderline personality disorder.

"I still have bad days. I still have times when those thoughts will come up," she admitted.

But the work she is doing to help others gives her the strength to overcome those feelings.

"I feel like I have a purpose now. I think everybody needs to have a purpose."

Speaking to groups at

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schools, hospitals and police departments is especially fulfilling for Tobias, who remembers how significant it was to her to hear that her situation was not hopeless.

"Just letting people know that there is hope on the other side of things," she said. "Today can be the worst day ever but that doesn't mean tomorrow is going to be that bad, too."

She believes one of biggest misconceptions about suicide is that it is a purely selfish act. People who are contemplating suicide aren't only thinking of themselves, she said. They believe they are a burden to their loved ones.

"I felt like everybody would be so much better off without me, that I would fix so many things if I were gone," she said. "It wasn't, 'Oh, I have to do this because I am tired of all this.' Those thoughts are there, but there's more to it than just thinking, 'I can't take it anymore.'"

Tobias said she's fortunate to have the support of her family, to whom she has

pledged complete honesty. Those who aren't as fortunate can find support if they are willing to look, she said.

"It can come from different support groups, different organizations, a church or other religious organization," she said. "There is support there but you have to be willing to reach out for it."

Not everyone is able to offer support. Tobias lost some friends when they first learned about her mental illness, but she has formed new relationships that are strengthened by a foundation of honesty.

"It's kind of this freeing feeling, honestly, because I don't feel like I have to be fake," she said.

The mask she wore for so many years has finally come off.

"I can't even describe how it feels to say — and honestly mean — when someone asks me, 'How are you doing today?' and to say 'I'm doing good,' and to really mean that and now I'm not lying or covering it up," she said. "It feels amazing."