



FIVE-YEAR-OLD ERIC AS BATMAN



# LIFTING THE VEIL

We lose more than 3,500 Canadians a year to suicide—the second leading cause of death for 10- to 24-year-olds. One mother, still coping with her son’s death one year later, has an important message to share about mental health. *BY KATE RAE*

“W

HEN I MEET PEOPLE and they ask me how old my kids are, I tell them, ‘Justin is 29, Conner is 19 and Eric would be turning 22,’ says Joy Pavelich, 52. Every year, Eric’s would-be age continues to climb, even though his life was cut short. “He will always be my son. I still want to talk about him,” Joy says simply. “I want to talk about him all the time.”

On Aug. 2, 2013, en route from Calgary to his grandmother’s farm in Kenaston, Sask., for the long weekend, Eric Schmit posted a giddy Facebook status update: “I’m comin’ with bells and whistles, Kenaston!!!” The following night, after a day spent goofing around on go-karts with his younger brother, he took his own life. He was 20.

The funniest guy in the room, talented mixed martial arts fighter, tough hockey player, loyal teammate, adoring boyfriend, generous soul and beautiful, gentle, artistic boy seemed to have it all. A suicide turns family and friends into investigators trying to piece together the tragedy: What signals did I miss? Why did he die? How could I have stopped it? “I know everyone wants to find ‘The Thing.’ We all want to find a reason,” says Joy, a single mother since her divorce in 2007. “But the truth is, there wasn’t

just one.” There was a family history of mental illness and suicide, and Eric’s history of depression, which began in his early teens and was being treated (successfully, Joy thought) with anti-anxiety medication. He was impulsive and diagnosed as a “rapid cyclist,” meaning that, when the dark clouds came, they moved in quickly and settled in deeply. Despite the Jekyll-and-Hyde effect alcohol had on him, he was drinking a lot.

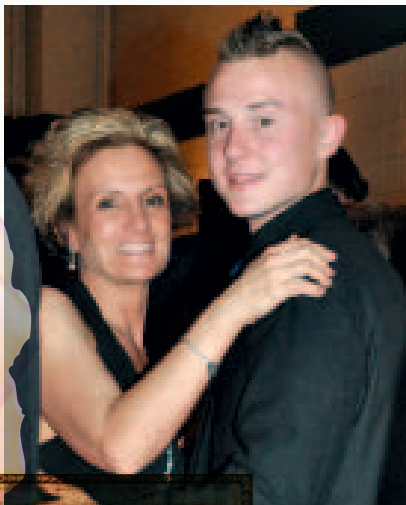
No one will ever know exactly what happened that night on his grandmother’s farm, but Joy describes it as a perfect storm, all the complex factors colluding and colliding with tragic, heartbreaking results. Eric had been in crisis before, but had always reached out to his family. “We would respond immediately and circle around him,” says Joy. “That was part of the



THE TALENTED MIXED MARTIAL ARTS FIGHTER AT AGE 19



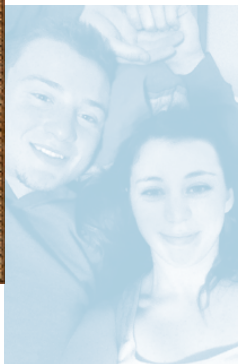
PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF JOY PAVELICH; ISTOCKPHOTO (BOXING GLOVES, FRAME)



ERIC AND HIS MOM AT HIS HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION



ERIC AND HIS BROTHERS, CONNER (LEFT) AND JUSTIN (CENTRE)



## Getting Help

Warning signs (seeming down, withdrawn or hopeless, and talking about death and wanting to die) might not always be present, or a loved one may successfully hide how he or she feels, says Dr. Marnin J. Heisel, a clinical psychologist in London, Ont. who specializes in suicide research. But if you or a loved one is feeling suicidal or expressing thoughts of suicide, there are many ways to seek help.

**1** Help your loved one contact his or her family doctor or go to a walk-in clinic; it's the best place to get a referral for a psychiatrist. The clinic may also have a list of other mental health professionals, such as psychologists and social workers, who you can get access to without a referral, says Dr. Heisel.

**2** Call a distress line, which can offer immediate support and local resources. To find the closest one, search online for "your town + suicide hotline."

**3** If you feel there is immediate danger, go to the closest hospital emergency department or call 911.

For more information, support and additional resources, visit [suicideprevention.ca](http://suicideprevention.ca).

surprise—that he didn't reach out that night." But sometimes suicide is not a decision; it's an impulse, less a plan than a compulsion that, for whatever reason, gets acted upon. For most, it's not about wanting to die, but about wanting to quiet the pain.

More and more families are pulling away the veil of how they lost their loved ones. Joy knew from the moment it happened that she was going to speak frankly about it. The decision to talk openly about how Eric died, to not cloak it in the "died suddenly and unexpectedly" euphemism, was instant, unanimous and obvious. "It was what it was," says Joy. "We told everyone that, unfortunately, despite everyone's best efforts and tremendous love, Eric died of suicide." (She, like many who have lost a loved one to suicide, rejects the phrase "committed suicide" and its criminal implications.)

Her mother's French Catholic priest quieted any worries Joy had about her religion's historical indictment of suicide, saying to her simply, "God doesn't care." Their communities in both Alberta and Saskatchewan rallied around the family. Any fears of the stigma surrounding mental illness and suicide were unfounded. There was no shunning, no shame. After Eric's service, the lineup to speak with Joy was over three hours long.

Looking through his phone following his death, his brothers found prayers Eric had written. The most devout member of the family ("God was the only thing Eric didn't need proof of," says his brother Justin), Eric had prayed to St. Dymphna, patron saint of mental illness, to help protect his mind. He'd prayed to St. Sebastian, patron saint of athletes, that he would always be strong in body and mind. He'd prayed to St. Raphael, patron saint of lovers, that he would cause no pain in his relationships.

Now, with the much-dreaded one-year anniversary of Eric's passing behind them, Joy and her sons are slowly figuring out how to move forward without him, how to, as Joy puts it, realign as a family without their middle child, without their glue. "There is a very specific grief for the siblings left behind," says Joy. "It's a world of supposed-tos: We were supposed to be best men at each other's weddings. Our kids were supposed to be cousins." Justin recently opened a gym in Strathmore, outside of Calgary, where he trains everyone from six-year-olds to pro fighters—even his mom, who works out with her sons several times a week. "The gym was Eric's dream," says Justin. "It's what he wanted to do."

For Joy, the grief has changed in the past year—her role has moved from investigator to mourner. Now it's less about having a son who died of suicide, and more about having a son who died. "I would feel the same way if he had died in a car accident," she says. "Now it's about figuring out how to live without a person who brought so much light into your life."

Eric's room is still the way he left it that day in August. That morning, after he'd left for Saskatchewan, Joy cleaned the house, excited about having the long weekend to herself. She started to strip Eric's bed, but stopped, deciding it was fine. That omission, she says, has saved her many times over the past year. "His sheets still smell of him," she says. "I can still climb into his bed and surround myself with him."

Joy started a new job last April as the communications leader for the Canadian Mental Health Association in Calgary, a

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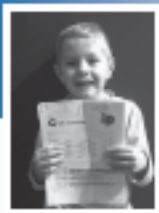
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## Speaking Up

The suicide rate for Canadians, as measured by the World Health Organization, is 15 per 100,000 people. (It's much higher for certain groups: For Inuit peoples living in Northern Canada, the rate is between 60 and 75 per 100,000). Depending on the age group considered, men are as much as four times more likely to die of suicide than women, for reasons that can only be speculated.

While the rates in Canada have not changed dramatically over the last 20 years, how we talk about suicide has. Families are beginning to speak up, organizing golf tournaments, bike rides and walks in memory of loved ones to raise both awareness and funds for suicide education and prevention. In obituaries, the word still jumps off the page, but more and more families are fighting against the stigma of mental illness by acknowledging the real reason behind their losses. And that is the first step in creating change.

There are some wonderful success stories when it comes to suicide prevention, says Dr. Marnin J. Heisel, a clinical psychologist and an associate professor in the department of psychiatry at Western University. Countries such as Ireland, Australia and New Zealand are seeing suicide rates drop. "They have all done an awful lot to raise awareness about suicide and suicide prevention, to develop and support national strategies and to take multicomponent approaches to enhance awareness and training of mental health professionals, helping people to access care more quickly and supporting research."

Here in Canada, he says, changes are underway to improve our own rates, and everyone (including families, health-care providers and government officials) has a role to play. The future is hopeful, he says, but we all have to get involved. "We can all do more."

place where she feels supported in both her own grief and in her mission to help break the silence around mental health and suicide. She reaches out to other parents who have lost their children, just as others had reached out to her as the new member of a club she never wanted to join. "Honour your grief," she tells them. "Don't try to hide it. Don't try to move at a pace that someone else thinks you should. Honour every emotion and don't be ashamed. Love your loved one."

In Eric's eulogy, his brothers spoke to the packed church about his childhood obsession with Batman and how he went everywhere in his Batman suit. They told the story of how a group of women had asked six-year-old Eric if he was going to be Batman for Halloween. "No," he said, "I'm going to be a knight in shining armour. I am Batman."

After Eric's death, in lieu of flowers, the family asked for donations to the Sheldon Kennedy Child Advocacy Centre in Calgary. The money raised was Eric's Gift within the Little Boys' Comfort Zone, an area for children to relax and prepare for interviews or examinations. "Of the pieces purchased, the most meaningful to our family is a row of costumes for children to dress up in," says Joy. Now small superhero costumes wait on a row of pegs for small hands to pull onto small bodies, to help them feel a little bit stronger, a little more powerful and a little better shielded from the pains of the world. ●

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