

DEALING WITH SUICIDE

■ Four people who lost someone through suicide speak about their painful ordeals

SPECIAL FEATURE

By Patrick Reilly

SUICIDE has claimed more lives in the past six years than road deaths. An incredible 2,738. Shocking but true.

Barely a week goes by without a headline declaring the latest road crash victim yet very few column inches are devoted to suicide. Even in 2006, the word suicide remains a taboo subject spoken about in hushed circles.

The reality is rather different as an average of nine people per week take their own life. Why? What can be done about it?

We spoke to four people who lost someone through suicide to find out the impact it continues to have on their lives. Names have been changed in some cases to protect identities.

“You never come to terms with it.”

Fergus Ledwith lost his son Stephen on May 18th 2005 at the tender age of 21. Stephen had attempted suicide only a few weeks earlier and his Dad recalls the conversation they had not long afterwards.

“Stephen came in and sat in my car and for the first time in a long time we had a good chat. I think he was really shocked by what he had done and the effect it had on the family.”

“We talked for ages and I thought we had made a real breakthrough. I told him to think of his brothers and how much they would miss him. We hoped his attempt was a cry for help and that we could get him some counselling.”

A talented sportsman and academic, Stephen was studying computer science in Dublin City University. His tutors remarked that he was one of the best students in the class and was doing well in his exams.

“Stephen was a quiet lad and he distanced himself from people. The way I would describe him is that he was painfully shy. He was one of the best pupils when it came to exams but he was really reluctant to do presentations in front of his peers.”

“I spoke to his tutors and they said there was no problem with him doing presentations on a one-to-one basis. At that stage I thought we were making progress.”

Tragically, a few days later Fergus received the phone call every parent dreads. Stephen had hung himself.

He recalls the day in such detail as if it were yesterday.

“I was in Dublin that day because of work and I got a phonecall from Stephen’s mum telling me that he had hung himself. She was totally hysterical.”

“When I got to the house there was a Garda car and an ambulance outside. I ran over to the ambulance and one of the medics wouldn’t let me in. I asked him how Stephen was and he didn’t know I was his dad and roared back at me ‘He’s dead’”

“That was the hardest part.”

“When I returned to work my colleagues were very supportive. It was then that I

realised how many other people were affected by suicide. People are committing suicide all the time yet nothing is being done about it.”

Fergus says the immediate months after Alan’s death were the toughest of his life. He sought out counselling which he says has been a massive help to him.

“My advice to families who have lost someone through suicide is to get good counselling. There is help available. You never come to terms with it though. Never.”

“I will always think ‘what if? What if?’”

Like many teenagers Sarah (not her real name) had fallen in love with a local lad. The teenage couple had been together for a year and a half after meeting at a party.

“I didn’t know he had problems like that. Alan (not his real name) was a quiet type of fella and didn’t really like to trust people. He didn’t say much. If he had a problem then you’d have to try and drag it out of him what was wrong.”

In the summer before his death the young couple had gone to Sarah’s graduation ball and it was there that she first got concerned about her boyfriend.

“We had an argument that night and he ended up walking off. I got really worried about him and thought he might do something stupid. It turned out that he was grand and I spoke to him later on.”

Sarah remembers her final encounter with Alan which took place exactly a week before his death.

“We had been to a local nightclub and Alan walked up Laurence Street with me to get a taxi. Both of us worked and were in college so we rarely saw each other.”

One week later and Alan was removed from Sarah’s life permanently. He was only 19 years old when he took his own life.

To add to Sarah’s heartache she was haunted by guilt.

“I got a phonecall from Alan’s sister and she said ‘I think you should sit down.’ My first instinct was to ring his mobile phone. You have so many different emotions.”

“The night Alan committed suicide he sent me a text asking if we wanted to meet up but I had already made plans for the night. I told him that we would meet up later in the week when we were both free.”

“When I found out what had happened to him all I could think of was what if I had been there for him that night. As long as I live I’ll always think ‘what if’. It will haunt me forever.”

Suicide levels among young males remain at an astonishingly high rate and Sarah is convinced that modern thinking must change.

“I wasn’t annoyed at Alan for doing what he did. I was more annoyed at this country for making him feel ashamed if he wanted to speak about his feelings.”

“If you’re a young man in Ireland and you talk about your feelings you’re considered a wimp and that is completely



■ Fergus Ledwith pictured with his late son Stephen at a golf outing when Stephen was a teenager.

wrong.”

The date of Alan’s birthday fell not long after his tragic premature death and Sarah forced herself to revisit haunts that held happy memories for her.

“I made myself go to places where we used to go together and that helped me remember the good times. Since Alan died I’ve found it hard to form relationships because I compared everyone to him.”

“Alan is going to remain a part of my life forever. He was my first love.”

“It wasn’t spoken about. People never used the word ‘suicide.’”

When Fr. Iggy O’Donovan comforts families who have lost someone through suicide, he truly can empathise with their pain. When he was 18 years of age he received the horrific news that his older brother Peter had committed suicide.

“I got a phone call in the early morning. At the time I was working in the Taoiseach’s department in the central statistics office and I recall I didn’t even tell my colleagues the details. I suppose I was embarrassed, but I guess they would have known anyway.”

“Peter emigrated when I was five but came home that summer before he died for a visit.

SUICIDES

Year	Number of suicides
2000	486
2001	448
2002	451
2003	444
2004	457
2005	452
Total	2,738

He worked as a labourer and he was probably typical of many Irish who went to London. Loneliness was a problem for many Irish people.”

Fr. Iggy can recall how his neighbours reacted to the news. “It wasn’t spoken about but neighbours rallied around as they do. People never used the word ‘suicide’. The only way to describe it is that it was a searing wound. At the time it was a very traumatic event.”

As an Augustinian, Fr. Iggy has often been confronted with families coming to terms with suicide. He knows only too well the devastating effect it can have on parents, brothers and sisters.

“My own view on it based on personal experience is that there are certain happenings in one’s life whether it’s the loss of a parent as a child, loss of a

child, break-up of a marriage or losing someone through suicide, they are not just part of the chronology of events but special milestones which mark other events.”

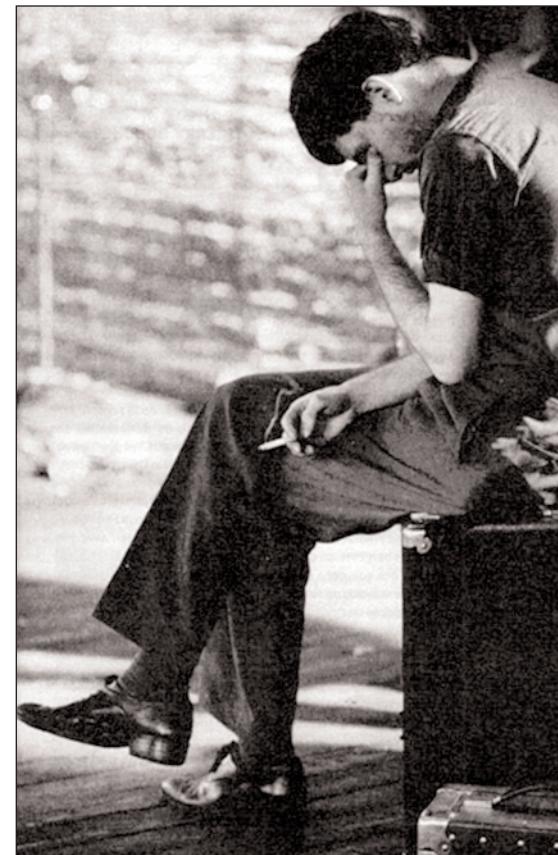
“When I come up against it, as I do fairly regularly, I don’t come at it from a judgemental point of view. No one of us ever fully reads the mind of another human being. I happen to believe we’re all dealt a hand of cards and there are some people where the dice are loaded against them from the beginning. I don’t know how I would have survived had I been in their place.”

Instead of seeing suicide as a moralistic issue, Fr. Iggy prefers to sympathise with the families and try and offer comfort.

“I believe the Lord is present in such events not as a cause but in the hardest of circumstances offers the possibilities of healing. I believe they are caught in the arms of the Lord who alone knows where they are coming from.”

Hop on a train or a bus and chances are most people will be nodding away to an iPod or engrossed in some other kind of media entertainment. Fr. Iggy says modern society has a role to play in highlighting suicide.

“People don’t communicate that much. Even going for a walk people are listening to music and barely make eye contact. It’s a problem that is



■ Joy Division singer Ian Curtis captured by photographer Anton Corbijn. Curtis took his own life aged 23 in 1980.

proving difficult to solve. A campaign on suicide awareness could help like the way they did it with smoking.”

“People perceived him as being happy.”

Michael (not his real name) was regarded by his friends and family as a highly intelligent well read man. In his early 30’s, he had returned to college as a mature student and according to most observers was enjoying this new phase of his life.

His brother Simon (not his real name) says his sibling struggled with depression and had spoken about it openly.

“We knew that he suffered with depression and occasionally he would mention it. When he was younger he was bullied and that certainly played a part.”

“Michael was a very private person and everything had to be meticulous for him. He told me that he was enjoying college life but because of the person he was he’d be very hard on himself. Everything had to perfect.”

Living on his own, Michael was a stickler for neatness and order. He was extremely well read and went to great pains to prepare things, often taking notes for a week before deciding which plan to take.

In the final weeks of his life, Michael seemed more withdrawn than usual as his brother recalls.

“The family were worried about him and he had tried going to see a psychiatrist but had found no solace in them.”

“On the day he died all the family were supposed to go to Dublin for a meal. We had been unable to contact Michael but I told my mum not to worry as he was probably busy and to go ahead.”

“I hadn’t heard anything from him as he wasn’t answering his phone. I called one of

his friends and they said the same thing.”

Simon called round to his brother’s house where he was confronted with a sight he will never forget. Like everything else in Michael’s life, his death had been planned right down to the smallest detail.

“His back door was open and it looked as though he was standing in the hall. I pushed the door to get in and that’s when I saw that he had hung himself. I couldn’t even look at him, it was total and complete shock.”

“If Michael was planning something he would have it well thought out. He had definitely researched how he was going to die.”

In the immediate aftermath of his brother’s death, Simon could only feel numb as the pain of losing Michael slowly began to sink in.

“I was amazed by how many people were affected by Michael’s death. So many people were coming up to the family to offer condolences. I don’t think he would have believed it himself.”

“Michael lacked confidence and felt he couldn’t fit in. Most people perceived him as being happy.”

Losing his brother has forced Simon to reevaluate life’s priorities.

“I feel lost without him. Sometimes I wonder what is the point of it all. You sort of wonder why you go out and work. Now I make more time for my family.”

“The people most likely to commit suicide are those who don’t broadcast it. Especially at this time of year people feel lonely. It really needs to be highlighted more.”

The Samaritans run a helpline and are available on the end of the phone 24-7. They can be contacted on 1850-609090 and locally on 041-9843888/9.