

“Learn More, Do More” to prevent suicide

by Allison Lindgren

“When people ask me how many children I have, I say I have three. Then, of course, they ask how old they are, so I tell them that I have one that’s 15, one that’s 17 and one that would be 20, but she passed away last year,” Joleen Thomas of Minot says when she speaks about her daughter Jocelyn, who died from suicide 10 days before her 19th birthday.

“Naturally, they inquire if she’d been sick or if she was in an accident. Initially I would always say that she’d been sick, but now I simply say, ‘Yes, she was sick and she died by suicide.’ Thomas added. “It makes people uncomfortable, but it also makes it okay to talk about it.”

Jocelyn’s obituary spoke lovingly about the daughter they loved and miss so deeply. It also made public the very real battle she fought daily throughout her life. It read, “Jocelyn fought valiantly for years with a transparent illness that could be intensely felt by her and her family, but remained unseen by others. Her parents and siblings wish for her passing to set a precedent for her other family members, friends and people in the community about the importance of mental health awareness, advocacy and treatment.”

You see, mental illness was something the Thomas family had addressed for a long time. And her death became a rallying call for her family to turn their pain into action and awareness.

Jocelyn was born October 20, 1996, in Bismarck, N.D. She struggled with mental health issues all through her childhood years and saw many mental health professionals during that time, including a psychiatrist, psychologists, and a counselor. Her healthcare plan included medication, intervention and even hospitalization.

Jocelyn’s parents started noticing things were not right when she was in third grade. She eventually was diagnosed with Mood Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified, which later evolved into a diagnosis of bi-polar disorder with borderline personality traits. Jocelyn was a fourth grader the first time she told them she didn’t want to live anymore.

She was their oldest child, and as parents they were more than a little taken aback by that statement. Thomas remembered thinking, “Who says those kinds of things?” Thomas now knows that mental illness is something that can present itself very early on, and few parents know the warning signs or the symptoms.

Thomas said that they often felt like they were the only ones dealing with issues like this. And even though it may seem like everybody else’s kids are honor students or starting on the basketball team, reality is quite different. Rather, mental illness and suicide are issues people just don’t talk about much.

“When you’re parenting a child with mental illness,



Jocelyn Thomas of Minot died by suicide on October 10, 2015 and her family is speaking out to help raise awareness and encourage support for those struggling with mental illness.

you feel like you are the only ones, but you’re not,” Thomas relates. “You’re also not the only family that’s facing the aftermath of suicide or the attempts that take place much more rampantly than people think.”

The year prior to Jocelyn’s death was especially tough. Her first suicide attempt was in February of 2015, and she ended up in ICU for four days. That caused problems for her in school, so she ended up finishing up her coursework and gaining her diploma that summer. She died in October of 2015.

Suicide prevention and awareness starts with mental health awareness and advocacy, and there’s a shortage of both, especially in rural areas. “While we were going through some of these things with Jocelyn, we drove her to Minneapolis to have her tested, just to make sure we were on the right track with the things we were doing with her health care here,” said Thomas. For a while, Jocelyn was involved with Child-Adolescent Partial Hospitalization Program (PHP), which is a short-term day treatment program for children or adolescents who require intensive support and structure for mental illness. However, when she got discharged from there, the family was at a loss.

“I remember thinking, ‘Now what do we do?’ The programs are few and far between,” said Thomas. “The toll that it takes on the whole family is unbelievable. It affects everyone in the family and the relationships they have with each other. Even the tone for the day tends to be set by the person with the mental health issues, if they’re struggling with depression that day or having some manic type behaviors.”

Jocelyn was three and five years older than her siblings, but since her issues started when she was in third grade, mental illness has affected them their whole lives. Thomas was quick to point out that the effects have not all been negative though; through Jocelyn’s mental health struggles, her siblings have both become more compas-

sionate toward people who are different from them. They know the importance of kindness, which is one of the positive results that came from the pain.

They also remember their beautiful sister, to whom there was much more than her illness. Jocelyn was wise beyond her years, extremely articulate, grammar conscious, and gifted with the spoken word. She was a writing enthusiast and a voracious reader. She taught herself to read at age 3. Jocelyn was a serious gamer, and Dragon Age was one of her favorite games. She also adored animals, especially cats; and she was a talented musician who played the cello, piano and accordion.

The Thomas family has had many people reach out to them, some they know personally and others who read the references to mental health awareness in Jocelyn’s obituary and relate. “We received random cards and letters from people who read about it and who have thanked us for doing that,” Thomas said.

Thomas said her family is very frank when they talk about Jocelyn’s mental health issues because they think it’s important for parents to know that mental healthcare is available, and they want to help eliminate the stigma that goes along with it.

Thomas said It’s so important to say the words “mental illness” and “suicide” out loud. One of the reasons they want to talk is to let people know that life can get so much better. When people are open to the healthcare and the medications that are available, they can avoid getting all the way to suicide.

Family members started talking in April of 2016 by offering to buy t-shirts for 10 people who would comment about suicide on Facebook. The goal was to start a conversation, even if just to say the word suicide publicly, she said. The response was much larger than she expected. Several people wanted to buy a shirt so they could wear it. The shirts started showing up in the community and in photos on Facebook.

The Thomas family then participated in the Out of

the Darkness walks in Minot organized by the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention.

“We were the largest team there. We refer to all our efforts as the Jocelyn Thomas Project,” commented Thomas. They handed out materials and made them available in various places in the community.

Then Joleen started speaking. Her first speaking engagement came in September of 2016 with a foster parents group. Then Velva High School asked her to speak to their students, which was followed by Kenmare.

One mother whose son had heard Thomas speak called to thank her. He had been having a particularly rough time dealing with depression, and he’d told his parents that he was so glad that she had come to the school because he too had felt like he was the only one.

Thomas also had young people come up to her with tears in their eyes after her presentations. One girl told her she had an attempt last summer and was so glad Thomas was there that day. “No, you know what?” replied Thomas. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

Thomas added that in her presentation she tries to stress that if we change our language, we can change people’s perspective. For instance, saying that someone “committed suicide” implies negativity, like saying they “committed” a crime. Decreasing that stigma of suicide starts with words.

She also referred to other common sayings that add to the stigma of mental illness, such as, “oh my gosh, he is so bipolar” or “my word, she is so OCD.” Often people attach these negative connotations to these mental illnesses. That doesn’t help the stigma of mental illness and it keeps people with these illnesses locked away in their own self-imposed prison.

“You never know if the words you say can help someone else who is going through a battle with mental illness...you don’t know what one kind word can do for someone that day, but you will never regret being kind. You don’t know. Be kind. Just be kind.”

Many parents in the community have reached out seeking support groups, and the Thomas family has considered starting one. “There really isn’t enough support. Families are struggling alone and you don’t know that other people are struggling, too.”

As for the future of The Jocelyn Thomas Project, Thomas said that she wasn’t sure how far they’d go or what they will do next. However, they will continue.

She concluded, “I do know that we are committed to keep going and keep trying to do something positive to make something good come from this awful hole in our family. It’s too late for us, but it’s not too late for somebody else.”