

# CHANDLER REPUBLIC

WEEKEND, SEPTEMBER 26, 2009

chandler.azcentral.com

Z6 SECTION CR

34 OPINIONS

Z6 WEEKEND » SEPTEMBER 26, 2009

## Professional help is available for those at risk of suicide

In 1999, U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher called suicide a serious public health problem. His declaration inspired dialogue about this difficult subject that takes more than 30,000 lives nationwide per year. During the past decade many others have made a difference, too — some becoming champions despite their extraordinarily painful experiences.



DAVID COVINGTON

Former Oregon Sen. Gordon Smith, with support from his wife, Sharon, successfully passed legislation to provide funding for states, universities and tribes after their 21-year-old son, Garrett Lee, ended his life in his apartment while attending college in 2003. Today, more than \$40 million in grants are invested annually in suicide prevention programs targeted at young adults, and Arizona was among the first recipients of this valuable funding.

In 2005, Dr. Thomas Joiner published

his landmark work, "Why People Die by Suicide." In his book, the professor of psychology at Florida State University tells the story of his dad's death by suicide, and lays out new research sug-

### MY TURN

gesting that the fundamental warning signs are social disconnectedness and a perception of burdensomeness to others. This exploration of suicide has resulted in a more compassionate approach to suicide and helped improve the assessment of risks.

Later that year, the first national conference for individuals who have survived a suicide attempt was held in Memphis, Tenn. Terry Wise was one of the keynote speakers, and she courageously toured the country sharing her story as a former Boston trial attorney who survived a suicide attempt after her husband died of Lou Gehrig's disease. Thanks to her efforts, peer support programs offer new promise for those continuing to struggle with intense psychiatric pain and a lack of self-preservation.

Another point of progress in the suicide prevention movement occurred when Joshua Omvig returned from Iraq in November 2004. Sadly, he struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder and killed himself in 2005, leaving a note that described his torment. In 2007, Congress passed the Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act that directs the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to develop and implement a comprehensive program to reduce suicide among veterans.

Today, an amazing array of new resources are available to veterans at every VA medical center nationwide, including a specialized suicide prevention coordinator on hand, as well as groundbreaking crisis intervention programs.

While the efforts of suicide prevention leaders have demonstrated tremendous progress, each year far too many lives are lost that could have been saved. Arizona has the sixth-highest suicide rate in the nation. In 2006, 986 individuals in Arizona died by suicide (twice the number by homicide). Treatment works — and help is available, but we need your help to

### Where to get help

If you are concerned about someone you know, call the Maricopa Crisis Line day or night at 800-631-1314.

reach those at risk. Stigma is a significant barrier and we must find ways to talk openly about this difficult subject.

Magellan Health Services of Arizona recognizes the significance of empowering the community to proactively address suicide prevention and offers the Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) to teach individuals how to help. These two-day programs are open to the public and provide the skills to discuss suicide with your friends and family.

Together, we can change the course of suicide in Maricopa County.

*David Covington is a Chandler resident and chief of adult services of Magellan Health Services of Arizona.*