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A publication of the Suicide Prevention Action Network USA

SPANUSA®

transitions continue—

A NEW CHAPTER

As the Suicide Prevention Action Network (SPAN USA) settles into its new Washington, D.C., office and the organization's transition process concludes, it may be helpful to recall the organization's impressive journey to date.

After losing their 34-year old daughter Terri Ann to suicide, Jerry and Elsie Weyrauch founded SPAN USA in 1996 to generate momentum at the grassroots to prevent suicide. Jerry and Elsie reached out to other family members and friends who suffered through the suicide of a loved one, helped ease their pain and invited them to join their growing advocacy movement.

Their determination helped elevate the public policy discussion about suicide and suicide prevention and led to numerous important milestones for the suicide prevention field.

By April 2001, the Weyrauchs realized the demands on SPAN USA resources were exceeding their capacity as advocates working out of their Marietta, Ga., home. They contacted Maury Lieberman, SPAN USA chairman of the board, and Leslie Scallet, SPAN USA National Advisory Council member, and asked for their input on how to move the organization to the next level to have greater impact on the

national discussion on suicide prevention. After months of brainstorming and planning, the Weyrauchs proposed the move to Washington, D.C. The board carefully considered the proposal and approved a transition plan. "This transition was the next logical step – and a critical step – to get the most from Jerry and Elsie's pioneering work and guarantee their legacy," Lieberman said.

Thus, within the last year, SPAN USA began a new chapter in its history. In July 2003, SPAN USA's operations moved to Washington, D.C., and the Weyrauchs retired as active directors. Today SPAN USA is building upon the solid foundation established by Jerry and Elsie and ensuring grassroots members have stronger voices, both influencing policy in Washington and supporting one another in the field. Under the guidance and leadership of the SPAN USA Board of Directors and Jerry Reed, executive director, the organization is in committed and capable hands.

SPAN USA's ability to mobilize people who care about suicide prevention remains the backbone and strength of the organization. Thousands of suicide survivors are deeply grateful to they Weyrauchs for their decision to position SPAN USA for continued success. As former Surgeon General David Satcher said, "I commend them for nurturing the SPAN organization to the point where it is now poised for even bigger and better things." ■

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executive director's **message**

I am pleased to be writing my first newsletter column as SPAN USA's executive director. On July 1, 2003, I assumed responsibility of day-to-day management for the organization, completing the transition from Marietta, Ga., to Washington, D.C.

The first nine months of my tenure have been busy. From day one we were in the midst of planning of our Eighth Annual National Awareness Event. It was a great event that marked the official transfer from Georgia to Washington, D.C. Since then we've found office space, hired staff, raised funds, collaborated with other advocacy groups, established SPAN USA as a membership organization, produced our first newsletter and fulfilled our obligations as a partner with the Suicide Prevention Resource Center.

I'm excited about our past and believe our future is promising. I would ask each of our past supporters to renew their support by becoming a SPAN USA member, and for those who are just learning of our organization, take a moment to "stand up and be counted." SPAN USA is about building political will, raising awareness and calling for action on suicide prevention. We have a National Strategy for Suicide Prevention and a report from the president of the United States calling for its implementation. Let's do what it takes to link the will with the action to get the job done! Our collective voice is the essential ingredient to advancing suicide prevention in America.

Jerry Reed
SPAN USA Executive Director



Eli Lilly and Company Foundation Provides Funding

SPAN USA's efforts to develop and expand its suicide survivor network received a major boost with a recent grant from Eli Lilly and Company Foundation. The foundation generously provided funding to support training, education and collaborative opportunities for SPAN USA's existing network and enable further expansion into all 50 states.

The grant will fund several key SPAN initiatives: an advocacy training conference for regional and state advocates; the Legislative Action Center, the Web-based advocacy center; a staff coordinator to work with regional and state organizers on community-based initiatives; CD or Web-based advocacy training curriculum; and a newsletter to provide a better communication link with SPAN USA organizers and members. ■

fall awareness
CONFERENCE

EARLY INTERVENTION BILL INTRODUCED

Following Senate hearings on adolescent suicide in early March, Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-Conn.) introduced The Youth Suicide Early Intervention and Prevention Expansion Act of 2004 (S. 2175). The legislation authorizes the secretary of Health and Human Services to award grants to: (a) develop and implement statewide youth suicide early intervention and prevention strategies, (b) collect and analyze data on youth suicide early intervention and prevention services and (c) help state achieve their targets for youth suicide reductions. The bill would provide \$30 million annually for three years to support development of statewide youth suicide prevention strategies and related technical assistance, data management and

research. At press time, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.), Sen. Michael DeWine (R-Ohio), Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nev.), and Sen. Gordon Smith (R-Ore.) were co-sponsors of the bill. Visit SPAN USA's Legislative Action Center to obtain the latest updates and contact your senators to request their co-sponsorship of S. 2175.

SPAN USA'S LEGISLATIVE ACTION CENTER

Quick and convenient access to your legislators in Washington, D.C., is just a few mouse clicks away through SPAN USA's Web-based Legislative Action Center (LAC). As one SPAN organizer said, "It took about two minutes — piece of cake. [The Legislative Action Center] is going to make it

much easier for us to raise our collective voices toward Capitol Hill."

Since the site's launch in November 2003, SPAN USA organizers have sent more than 350 e-mail messages promoting suicide prevention to their congressional representatives and the White House. To make communication easy, LAC features four pre-written messages on key mental health and suicide prevention initiatives. In addition, the site provides an opportunity to write individualized messages, as well as essential information on relevant legislation, voting records of legislators on certain bills and contact information for local media outlets. Visit the Legislative Action Center at <http://capwiz.com/spanusa/home/> and share your views with Washington. ■

resource roundup

Preliminary data on U.S. deaths in 2002 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics. The data revealed that overall mortality rates dropped slightly, with the suicide rate remaining virtually stable. To access the most recent national data, see Deaths: Preliminary Data for 2002 at www.cdc.gov/nchs/.

Results from NIMH's PROSPECT study. Depression care managers in doctors' offices help depressed elderly patients reduce their suicidal thoughts. Write-up in the March, 3, 2004 Journal of the American Medical Association.

2002 data on suicides by drug overdose in metropolitan areas available from SAMHSA's Drug Abuse Warning Network (DAWN). The data revealed that 16 percent of the drug abuse deaths were ruled suicides in the average metropolitan area. To see your city's profile, visit http://dawninfo.samhsa.gov/pubs_9402/mcpubs.

A recently published journal article highlighted the effectiveness of the Signs of Suicide (SOS) High School Suicide Prevention Program in reducing suicidal behavior among students. The study found a 40 percent reduction in suicide attempts as well as greater knowledge and

more adaptive attitudes about depression and suicide due to the SOS program. For more details, see March 2004, Vol. 94, No. 3, American Journal of Public Health, 446-451 or www.ajph.org/cgi/content/abstract/94/3/446.

Evaluation of the U.S. Air Force suicide prevention program yields promising results.

Outcomes included a 33 percent reduction in suicide risk and significant reductions in other adverse outcomes (e.g., homicide, accidental death, moderate/severe family violence). For more information, see the December 2003 issue of the British Medical Journal at www.bmj.com. ■

SPAN Fundraiser

“While we cannot change the past, together we can shape the future.”

Dr. David Satcher, former Surgeon General, in a letter congratulating SPAN USA on its first fundraiser in Washington, D.C.



Sen. Gordon Smith (R-Ore.) and Jerry & Elsie Weyrauch, co-founders of SPAN USA, at the first SPAN USA fundraiser in the nation's capital on Feb. 10, 2004. Guests included congressional representatives, SPAN USA board members, Washington, D.C., business community members and others committed to suicide prevention.



Lidia Bernik, SPAN USA program coordinator; Jerry Reed, SPAN USA executive director; and Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nev.) took part in the reception to thank SPAN USA's Friends for Life donors. With Lifekeeper Memory Quilts from Nevada and Oregon on display and musical performances for entertainment, the event raised \$42,000 to help support SPAN USA's efforts to reduce suicide and suicidal behavior in our nation.



Maury Lieberman, SPAN USA chairman of the board; Leslie Scallet, SPAN USA National Advisory Council member; and Dr. Lloyd Potter, project director of the Suicide Prevention Resource Center, listen to speakers. The speaking program included remarks by Jerry Reed, Jerry and Elsie Weyrauch, Sen. Harry Reid, and Sen. and Mrs. Gordon Smith.

advocates in **action**

In this section, SPAN USA's Network News profiles individuals making a difference in suicide prevention at the national, state and local levels.

Linda Flatt

SPAN USA-NV Community Organizer
SPAN USA Board of Directors Secretary

Linda Flatt somehow manages to juggle countless hours of volunteer work with her job in a dental office. Below Linda describes how she warily became a SPAN USA organizer – and the satisfying results.

What brought you to field?

My journey started with my son Paul's suicide in June 1993. His death blew me away. While I had experienced many difficult losses before, this loss was so much bigger and more complicated. I spent about two or three years putting myself back together again and educating myself. Along the way, I decided to reach out to other survivors. Before Paul died, I facilitated a women's support group and knew the power of peer support. So, in 1996, I began a survivor group at my church. I put all my energy into that group. At first, I didn't allow myself to explore the area of prevention. I wasn't convinced suicide was preventable because I couldn't prevent my son's suicide. However, as more people turned to me concerned about friends and family who seemed at-risk, I eventually found myself looking for prevention information.

How did you make the leap to advocate?

I attended a two-day survivors' conference in Colorado Springs in 1997. The keynote speaker talked about the importance of pending suicide prevention resolutions in Congress. I listened with half an ear because I didn't want to hear about anything that would require more of my time. SPAN letters promoting the resolutions floated around the room, but I ignored them. On the second day, I had lunch with a woman who saw I was from Nevada. She encouraged me to become more involved. I replied that the support group was all I could handle. But, for some reason, I picked up some blank SPAN letters with the Weyrauchs' phone number. When I got home to Nevada, I called the SPAN number, and Elsie answered the phone. I asked what it meant to be a community organizer. She answered, "Anything you want it to mean, Dearie." Thus, my journey with SPAN began.

What have advocates accomplished in Nevada?

In 1999, I went to the Nevada legislature wanting to start small – a resolution acknowledging that Nevada



Linda Flatt with a Nevada Lifekeeper Quilt

had a serious suicide problem. Nevada's suicide rate hovers around double the national rate. Sponsored by state Sen. Ann O'Connell, the resolution sailed through the legislature because it had no fiscal impact. At the end of the session, we obtained \$200,000 to fund a statewide, toll-free suicide prevention hotline. In 2001, I wanted to push for a state suicide prevention strategy. Noting that Nevada was in difficult financial straits, O'Connell instead recommended another resolution requesting an interim study. Her advice turned out to be incredibly wise counsel. The resolution barely passed, but the appointed subcommittee took the issue and ran with it, conducting hearings throughout the state and bringing together key players. The subcommittee issued its interim study, drafted several pieces of legislation and submitted a compelling report to the governor. The legislation was adopted during the following session. We're still waiting for the implementation phase – like hiring the state suicide prevention coordinator. However, the 2003 release of the President's New Freedom Commission Report and its emphasis on suicide prevention seems to have fueled renewed interest in implementation.

What do you enjoy about this work?

I enjoy seeing the results of our efforts. We can see we're really making a difference. I can talk to an audience about SPAN USA's early vision of written guidelines for suicide prevention in the United States, then lift up a copy of the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention and show the room that this dream was accomplished as a result of our efforts. That's exciting.

Lidia Bernik

SPAN USA Program Coordinator

Originally from New York City, Lidia Bernik joined the SPAN USA staff in September 2003 as program coordinator. She has a master's degree in health science from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and a bachelor of science

from Cornell University. In an interview, Lidia explains her journey to the SPAN USA national office.

What drew you to suicide prevention field?

I've always been interested in mental health. My bachelor's degree is in human services, and I interned for two summers at a psychiatric hospital in Westchester, N.Y.

However, my biggest connection to this work is my sister, Ren, who had depression on and off for many years. Even though she was seven years older, I was her confidante. On April 28, 2000, Ren completed suicide. I was in the final weeks of my senior year in college.

What are your thoughts about suicide and suicide prevention?

Suicide is not the same as other types of deaths. There's a lot of blaming and finger pointing. When my sister died, I felt alienated and thought no one else would understand my experience. During the next two years, I worked at a big corporate law firm in New York City. The overtime hours and all-nighters felt like a good distraction. The rest of the time I was in grief mode, talking to a therapist and attending a few survivor groups.

When my sister died, I wasn't aware of the magnitude of the suicide epidemic. In retrospect, I'm frustrated by the lack of available information. Here I was, an educated, super-involved person who attended an Ivy League school and worked at a psychiatric hospital. Yet, I still didn't really understand the link between depression and suicide. I never heard about the public health approach to suicide, like the range of risk factors for suicide. The general public simply does not understand suicide. I'd like to help change that so people will be as aware of suicide prevention as they are of other well-known public health issues, such as AIDS.

What's your role at SPAN?

I coordinate with organizers and suicide survivors in the field and keep them up-to-date with good infor-



Lidia Bernik

CALIFORNIA SPAN – California will hold a Suicide Prevention Planning Conference, “Furthering the National Strategy in California,” May 6-7, 2004, in Sacramento.

FLORIDA ■ March 23, 2004, was the Florida Suicide Prevention Coalition’s second Day at the Capitol, which featured a press conference with Gov. and Mrs. Jeb Bush. Florida is also considering a bill that would create a state office for suicide prevention. Visit www.floridasuicideprevention.org. ■ The Suncoast Yellow Ribbon’s third annual vigil is July 9, 2004, at South Beach across from John’s Pass Village, in Madeira Beach, Fla.

INDIANA ■ The Indiana State Suicide Prevention Coalition recently hired a project coordinator. The coalition continues its efforts to finalize the state suicide prevention plan.

KENTUCKY ■ The Kentucky Senate introduced Joint Resolution 148 calling for a state suicide prevention advisory committee. SPAN-KY is working with the Kentucky Department of Health and other health agencies to plan the first state suicide prevention awareness convention scheduled for September 2004. Visit www.span-ky.com.

MASSACHUSETTS ■ The third annual Massachusetts Suicide Prevention Conference, “Caring Communities Save Lives: Suicide Prevention Across the Lifespan,” is May 18 at Holy Cross College, Worcester, Mass. For information, contact Alan Holmlund at (617) 624-5476 or alan.holmlund@state.ma.us contact Greg Miller at (781) 396-5784 or gregmiller2@comcast.net.

MICHIGAN ■ Michigan formed a State Suicide Prevention Coalition and is working on developing a state suicide prevention plan. ■ On March 9-10, 2004, the University of Michigan hosted a conference on depression on college campuses, “Connections to Stress, Sleep and Alcohol.”

MINNESOTA ■ The Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program of Minnesota sponsored a trip to the state capitol for its youth board members on March 30, 2004.

NEVADA ■ Nevada is waiting for the Department of Human Resources to begin the selection process for a state suicide prevention coordinator. The newly created position was established by SB49, which was adopted by the Nevada Legislature in its 2003 session.

NEW MEXICO ■ A core group has formed to determine the direction and carry out the work for its New Mexico Suicide Prevention Coalition.

NEW YORK ■ In January, the New York State Office of Mental Health released its Statewide Comprehensive Plan for Mental Health Services 2004-2008. The plan is available at www.omh.state.ny.us/omhweb/statewideplan. See Chapter 7 for details about the campaign.

PENNSYLVANIA ■ The Delaware County Suicide Awareness/Prevention Task Force held an organizational meeting March 11, 2004, in Drexel Hill, Pa. The Montgomery County Suicide Prevention Task Force sponsors “Seniors and Suicide” on May 17, 2004, for health care professionals and nursing home and assisted living facilities staff.

TENNESSEE ■ In January 2004, the Tennessee Suicide Prevention Network launched its new Web site, www.tspn.org. ■

To obtain more information or share your state’s activities in the next newsletter, contact Lidia Bernik at lbernik@spanusa.org.

SPAN USA

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mation. I enjoy finding recent and scientifically sound information, such as research studies, and providing the information to organizers, who then will spread that information around. My role is to bridge the vast amounts of technical information on suicide and suicide prevention with the needs of organizers who want current information for their grassroots efforts. I also try to provide a feedback loop to the field so people in the network understand the important impact they have on public policy.

This job is very rewarding. However, on a personal level, it still can be hard because I'm only four years down the road from my sister's death. On some days, I just want to sit and cry. However, Ren's presence is always with me. As SPAN organizers get to know me, I hope they realize, "She's one of us." ■

Membership Opportunity

Send a contribution today or become a SPAN USA Friend for Life to help America's most effective grassroots suicide prevention organization continue its important work. Mail to: SPAN USA, 1025 Vermont Ave. NW, Suite 1200, Washington DC 20005

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