



NETWORK NEWS

SUICIDE PREVENTION ACTION NETWORK USA

Opening Minds. Changing Policy. Saving Lives.®

In Search of Ordinary Heroes: SPAN USA Launches Field Liaison Program

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, “A hero is no braver than an ordinary man, but he is braver five minutes longer.”

In 1999, Larry Lewis had no heroic aspirations as he accompanied his wife, Vanessa, to attend SPAN USA’s national event in Washington, D.C. His first visit to the nation’s capital, he planned to go to a few sessions and then see the sights. However, he ended up staying at the meeting, drawn in by the “compassion and passion” exuded by SPAN USA founders Jerry and Elsie Weyrauch. At the end of the two days, the Weyrauchs encouraged Larry and Vanessa to establish a SPAN USA presence back in Michigan. During the 12-hour drive home, Larry thought of little else. The man who had



Larry and Vanessa Lewis advance suicide prevention in Michigan.

worked for 34 years in the steel industry was about to take that brave first step toward becoming a leading suicide prevention advocate in his home state.

With the launch of its new Field Liaison Program, SPAN USA is encouraging others to take similar steps and become “ordinary” heroes in their own communities. Franklin Cook, SPAN USA secretary and chair of the board’s field development committee, said that identifying field liaisons is “a natural outcome of progress that the suicide prevention movement has been making nationally.” SPAN USA field liaisons will help educate their community about suicide prevention, mobilize grassroots support for policy change

and be a resource for suicide survivors. “People working on prevention and advocacy at the community level are the link between the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention, statewide prevention strategies and what happens locally,” Cook said. To that end, SPAN USA will recruit a field liaison from each of the 435 congressional districts to serve as those links.

SPAN USA’s Field Liaison Program will organize the people currently working to build political will and help suicide prevention take root in local communities. Kimberlee Jones, the program director of a statewide suicide prevention hotline, is already doing grassroots

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STAFF

Jerry Reed
Executive Director
jreed@spanusa.org
Brian Altman
Director of Public Policy and Program Development
baltman@spanusa.org
Lindsay Paulette-Chapman
Development Coordinator
lpaulette-chapman@spanusa.org
Jason H. Padgett
Field Development Coordinator
jpadgett@spanusa.org
Karin Schild
Administrative Assistant
kschild@spanusa.org

SPAN USA
1025 Vermont Ave. NW, Suite 1066
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 449-3600
(202) 449-3601, fax
www.spanusa.org

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Spring is a time for new beginnings. It is in this spirit that I want to share SPAN USA's plans to strengthen our field development program.

As you all know, the grassroots have been and will continue to be the strength of our organization. As we become more successful in advancing suicide prevention, we need to build our capacity across the nation.

Since many of our efforts are centered in the community where suicide prevention really takes place, we are launching an initiative to identify one field liaison in every congressional district across the nation. That's right, 435 field liaisons.

These volunteers will be SPAN USA's lead coordinators in the congressional district where they live. They will work with other local advocates and leaders on behalf of suicide prevention. They will be better suited to personally work with their elected leaders since they live and vote in those districts. Also, they will know the strengths, services, shortfalls and supports available in their communities.

Please consider representing your community as a SPAN USA field liaison and help us build upon the many achievements of the SPAN USA grassroots. Contact Jason H. Padgett at jpadgett@spanusa.org or call him at (202) 449-3600 to talk about it further.

Thanks for making a difference!

Jerry Reed, *Executive Director*



Director of Public Policy and Program Development

Brian Altman hit the ground running when he joined the SPAN USA staff in January 2007. The Tulsa, Okla., native now spends much of his time shuttling between Capitol Hill and the SPAN USA national office in his role as director of public policy and program development. To introduce him to the SPAN USA community, *Network News* posed a few questions to Altman.

What's been your advocacy experience to date? Most recently, I was a legislative representative for the American Counseling Association. Similar to my SPAN USA responsibilities, I worked on public policy related to mental health care. However, at SPAN USA, I'll also be more involved with public affairs which will allow us to more effectively communicate our accomplishments.

Previously, I worked as the Political

Action Committee manager at the American Forest and Paper Association and as a Legislative Assistant for a small lobbying firm named Chambers Associates.



Brian Altman

What drew you to SPAN USA?

Even though SPAN USA has been around for 11 years, the organization is still in the early stages of connecting survivors with how to effectively advocate for specific mental health and suicide prevention issues. I look forward to talking with survivors and trying to help them transform their personal stories into something that can be a focal point for a specific piece of legislation. ■

Raising Awareness and Support for Suicide Prevention

It is humbling and inspiring to see how people who have been touched by suicide continually find ways to raise awareness and generate support for the work of SPAN USA.

A recent event that raised both awareness and funds was a benefit concert in Dallas, Texas, on Feb. 17, 2007. The cause of suicide prevention is close to the heart of concert organizer Justin Petri, Right Place Records; his mother died by suicide seven years earlier.

Smile Smile, one of the featured bands, played a song it wrote about suicide called "Your Life." Other bands included Red Monroe, Calhoun and Tommy Hernandez. SPAN USA Board Member Carol Graham and her daughter Melanie attended the event and said the concert was healing for the many



NEGATIVE COWGIRL PHOTOGRAPHY

Smile Smile's musicians Jencey Hirunrusme and Ryan Hamilton played in a benefit concert and are donating proceeds from their most recent album *Blue Roses* to SPAN USA. Those wishing to support SPAN USA can purchase the album by visiting www.smilemusic.com and indicating "SPAN USA" in the note to seller section using the Paypal system.

people there who had been touched by depression and suicide.

Suicide survivors also use the Web to advance suicide prevention awareness and support. Over the last three years, individuals have given more than \$11,000 in donations to SPAN USA through Firstgiving Memorial Web pages. Created by survivors, these personalized Web pages celebrate the lives of those lost to suicide and encourage others to support SPAN USA prevention efforts.

If you would like to hold an event

that raises both awareness and funds in your own community, contact SPAN USA to receive informational materials and help with contacting other survivors or advocates in your community who could help with or attend the event. To learn more about how to create your own Firstgiving Memorial Web page, go to www.spanusa.org/celebrate.

PLEASE JOIN US IN THANKING THOSE WHO HAVE GENERATED SUPPORT FOR SPAN USA AS THEY REMEMBER LOVED ONES THROUGH FIRSTGIVING WEB PAGES.

- Maureen Ahokas in memory of Michael Fitzgerald
- Bonnie E Gibson-Forshey in memory of Billy Holesapple
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- Colleen E Sybert in memory of Leanne Duke
- Kim Tipton in memory of Steve Turner
- Ilima Young in memory of Robert Young

Firstgiving pages established during the period July 2005 through April 2007.

SPAN USA'S 12TH ANNUAL NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION AWARENESS & TRAINING EVENT

(Formerly known as the National Awareness Event)

Washington, D.C. • July 18-21, 2007

Join us for "Building Hope for the Future," an event that will inspire and inform anyone involved with suicide prevention – survivors, clinicians, researchers, advocates and policy makers. Registration for last year's meeting filled up and closed early, so, *register today!*

Convenient, online registration is available. Visit www.spanusa.org/2007spate.



Rep. Patrick Kennedy (D-RI) shares a moment with Jerry Reed, SPAN USA executive director.

SPAN USA Celebrates a Circle of Friends

On March 6, 2007, SPAN USA held its fourth annual "Friend for Life" Reception, in Washington D.C. The event honored congressional champions of suicide prevention and those who have generously donated funds to support SPAN USA. Sen. Gordon Smith (R-OR), Rep. Patrick Kennedy (D-RI) and Rep. Shelley Berkley (D-NV) were among the special guests.

Continued appreciation goes to those who renewed their sponsorship from previous "Friend for Life" Receptions (as indicated by *italics*). To see more event photos and the full list of SPAN USA's generous friends, go to www.spanusa.org/2007friendforlife.

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VETERANS' BILL PASSES U.S. HOUSE

On March 21, 2007, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act (H.R. 327) by a unanimous vote. The bill is named for Joshua Omvig, who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder following an 11-month tour of duty in Iraq and completed suicide in 2005 at his home in Iowa. SPAN USA is grateful to Rep. Bob Filner (D-CA), the House Veterans' Affairs Committee chairman, and Rep. Leonard Boswell (D-IA), the bill's sponsor, for their work in ensuring the measure's swift passage.

H.R. 327 directs the secretary of Veterans Affairs to develop and implement a comprehensive program to reduce the incidence of suicide among veterans, make available 24-hour mental health care for veterans found to be at risk and develop an outreach and education program for veterans and their families to recognize readjustment problems and promote mental health.

"One life lost to suicide is one too many. With the passage of the Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention bill, I'm hopeful that this problem will be adequately addressed by the VA," Boswell said.

"Nothing is more important than ensuring that our veterans receive the mental health care that they need," said

Jerry Reed, executive director of SPAN USA. "Preliminary data indicate that veterans are at a higher-than-average risk for suicide. The data suggest that 19 percent of all completed suicides are veterans, but they only make up 11 percent of the population – making passage of the Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act all the more critical."

Brian Altman, SPAN USA director of public policy and program development, expressed appreciation to the grassroots activists for their work. "Without their e-mails and calls this important piece of legislation may not have passed. The bill's rapid movement shows that advocacy in action works."

The Senate version of the bill, S. 479, was introduced by Sens. Tom Harkin (D-IA) and Charles Grassley (R-IA) in February, but no further action has been taken. Altman encouraged readers to ask their senators to co-sponsor the bill, by sending an e-mail through the SPAN USA Legislative Action Center at: <http://capwiz.com/spanusa/homel>.

MENTAL HEALTH PARITY BILLS REINTRODUCED

Mental health parity took two important steps forward on Capitol Hill in recent months. On Feb. 12, 2007, Sens. Pete Domenici (R-NM), Michael Enzi

(R-WY) and Ted Kennedy (D-MA) introduced the Mental Health Parity Act of 2007 (S. 558), and on March 9, 2007, Reps. Patrick Kennedy (D-RI) and Jim Ramstad (R-MN) introduced the Paul Wellstone Mental Health and Addiction Equity Act of 2007 (H.R. 1424). These bills would allow more people in need of mental health and addiction recovery services to obtain equitable insurance coverage for their conditions.

S. 558 passed the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee by a vote of 18–3 on Feb. 14. It is not yet known when the full Senate will debate the bill. The House bill is also making its way through committees.

Notable provisions in both bills include: parity for day and visit limits, co-payments, deductibles and other ways in which health plans have discriminated against mental health; parity for in-network and out-of-network services, when those services are offered; and parity for substance-abuse treatment.

Altman asked readers to express support for mental health parity, which is one of SPAN USA's public policy priorities. Visit the SPAN USA Legislative Action Center for updated information on the bills and to contact your representative and senators. ■

RESOURCE ROUNDUP

SHOP THE SPAN USA MARKETPLACE

SPAN USA now has a convenient way for supporters to purchase items that symbolize their commitment to suicide prevention. The SPAN USA Marketplace offers Lifekeeper Jewelry, suicide prevention pins and SPAN USA T-shirts, all of which may be purchased online with a credit card. In addition, resource guides and booklets are available for 25 cents per copy and the cost of shipping. Go to www.spanusa.org/marketplace to order.

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

The following public health observances focus attention on prevention and treatment of mental illnesses, the leading contributor to suicide.

Mental Health Month 2007: MIND Your Health.

Entire month of May
<http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/go/may>

Schizophrenia Awareness Week.

May 20-26.
<http://www.nsfoundation.org/>

Older Americans Mental Health Week.

May 20-26.
<http://www.owl-national.org/mentalhealthweek/index.html>

6th Annual Massachusetts Suicide Prevention Conference.

May 15-16. <http://www.neias.org/pdf/MAFY07SuicideConfBrochure.pdf>

Suicide Prevention Across the Lifespan: Dreams and Realities.

Aug. 28-Sept. 1.
<http://www.iasp2007.org>
International Association of Suicide Prevention hosts in Ireland

When individual advocates act collectively, suicide prevention is advanced in their state and everybody wins. For “States in Action,” a few key advocates from California and Florida shared the latest promising developments in their states. However, the individuals featured below are quick to acknowledge that their states’ successes are due to the hard work of many.

CALIFORNIA

The ground is shifting in California – but in a positive way – as the state plans to implement the sweeping Mental Health Services Act (MHSA). Approved in November 2004, the MHSA authorized a 1 percent income tax on personal income in excess of \$1 million and required that funds be spent on new mental health programs. For the fiscal year ending June 30, 2007, California expects to collect \$1.6 billion in MHSA revenue, more than double the monies anticipated by planners. Mark Chaffee, president of SPAN-California, an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit addressing the issue of suicide in California, called the figure “mind-boggling.”

California’s prevention/early intervention programs are slated to receive 20 percent of MHSA funds. Thus, annually for the next four years, the state will allot the following amounts to new state-level programming: \$14 million for suicide prevention programs, \$20 million for stigma and discrimination reduction and \$12 million for training to help non-mental health partners identify and address suicidal behavior. The state also has allocated \$1 million for suicide prevention planning over two years.

Despite all the success (or maybe because of it), SPAN-California’s work is far from over. “Lots of people need to be educated so they can make appropriate plans,” said Sam Bloom, who received SPAN USA’s Founders Award in 2005 along with his wife, Lois. To that end, Bloom started a mailing campaign to educate decision makers about suicide and remind them that “the worst outcome of mental illness is sui-



cide.” The series of mailings is just one piece of Bloom’s continual efforts to make sure suicide prevention is given appropriate attention. With no apology, Bloom described his activities as “constantly nagging and pushing.”

FLORIDA

The suicide prevention movement in Florida illustrates the adage “slow and steady wins the race.” On their fourth try, advocates finally convinced lawmakers to pass legislation (HB 139 and SB 224) that will establish a statewide office for suicide prevention, statewide coordinator position and Suicide Prevention Coordinating Council under the governor’s office. At press time, the legislation was waiting to be signed by the governor, the final step of the process.

The road to reach this milestone has been bumpy. Similar legislation was introduced in 2004 and passed by the Florida Senate but went no further. The next year, the bill died in a House com-

mittee. In 2006, the legislation passed the House but never reached the Senate floor because it “got caught up in a political food fight” over an unrelated matter, according to Judy Bousquet, one of the SPAN Florida advocates working to ensure passage of the initiative.

Bousquet joined the advocacy ranks as a way to channel her grief after she survived the suicide of her son Brett in 2003. She quickly learned that legislative defeats are part of the advocacy process. “It’s hard to not take it personally,” she said. “[Legislators] don’t want to hear about the human toll of suicide. They just want it to go away.”

However, Bousquet and her fellow advocates have not gone away. Each year the legislation failed, they regrouped and developed new strategies. They also lined up the services of Kingsley Ross, a professional lobbyist married to a member of the Florida Task Force on Suicide Prevention who worked pro bono.

Working hand-in-hand, Bousquet and SPAN Florida’s Pam Harrington expanded their network for drumming up grassroots support. They regularly sent messages through the list serves of both the Florida Coalition for Suicide Prevention and SPAN USA. Bousquet called the communication mechanism “very effective and so easy.”

Florida state lawmakers also heard personally from advocates. Bousquet, Harrington and four volunteers from a local crisis center traveled to Tallahassee to visit with 60 legislators and request their support. Then on April 25, a day declared to be Suicide Prevention Day by Florida Gov. Charlie Crist, Jerry Reed, SPAN USA executive director, joined hundreds of people at a rally in Tallahassee to show legislators that the community really does care about this issue.

Throughout this process, Bousquet has learned that advocates need to “focus on one step at a time” and that the journey may be frustrating, as well as slow and steady. However, she added, “If I can prevent one mother from getting the call that I got, then it’s worth it.” ■

Liaison FROM PAGE 1

work in Fairbanks, Alaska. Her passion for suicide prevention grew out of her work with suicide survivors; she sees her role as helping survivors to find and use their voices to affect change. "Survivors feel powerless over their loss, but so many want to use their voice to prevent suicide," Jones said.

Ever since Jones attended the SPAN USA national event in 2004, she has been a pivotal link in efforts to change national and state policies. She established an e-mail network to forward SPAN USA information to survivors, clinicians and policy makers. She also helps Alaskans connect with their local and national legislators by sharing SPAN USA training materials. "We talk about how to speak with legislators in a way that encourages them to stop and listen and impassions those who are ignorant about the issue," Jones said.

In Michigan, Lewis has spent the last eight years building bridges to advance suicide prevention. In an attempt to breathe new life into a draft state suicide prevention plan that had been sitting on a shelf, Lewis convened a coalition of people from the public and private sector to resume work on the state plan. The group usually held "virtual meet-

ings" through a list serve since "Michigan has rough winters, and it's hard to get everyone together," according to Lewis. Even after the coalition reached agreement on the statewide suicide prevention plan in 2005, Lewis has maintained these important connections.

ROLLING OUT THE FIELD LIAISON PROGRAM

SPAN USA will officially unveil the Field Liaison Program at the July 2007 Suicide Prevention Awareness and Training Event. Field liaisons will be asked to disseminate policy updates and information about SPAN USA activities, increase awareness of suicide as a public health problem for every community and reach out and build partnerships with community members. Jason H. Padgett, SPAN USA field development coordinator, said, "Field liaisons are the community organizers of the 21st century."

The primary qualification to be a field liaison is the desire to prevent suicide in your community. As Lewis said, "I feel very passionate [about suicide prevention]. You don't have to be a survivor to do that. All of us are survivors in one way or another." Padgett acknowledged that volunteers will have varying amounts of time to dedicate to the field liaison role, all of which adds

to the important progress in the suicide prevention movement.

SPAN USA will ask field liaisons to serve a two-year term to coincide with the Congressional term of their elected representative and will train, support, guide and empower them to advance suicide prevention in their communities, their states and the nation. Field liaisons will be encouraged to use SPAN USA's Legislative Action Center to forward legislative updates to their own network and request that SPAN USA issue alerts via its e-mail system. In order to assist field liaisons, SPAN USA's Web site features new state pages with overviews of statewide prevention activities. Thus, field liaisons will be able to learn about the work taking place in other states as well as share their own progress. Specialized Web-content specifically for the field liaisons will be an ongoing resource for those who take on this important role.

In the early 1900s, the French writer Roman Rolland wrote, "A hero is one who does what he can. The others don't." Larry Lewis and Kimberlee Jones are doing what they can. Imagine the impact of 433 like-minded people joining their ranks.

Are you ready to be an ordinary hero in your community? ■

Join us as a Partner for Action...

Send a contribution today and help SPAN USA, America's most effective grassroots suicide prevention organization, continue opening minds, changing policies, and saving lives. By supporting SPAN USA, you can be a part of the solution and join us as we confront suicide as a public health problem. For more information, go to www.spanusa.org. Use the enclosed envelope & mail to: SPAN USA, 1025 Vermont Ave., NW, Ste 1066, Washington, DC 20005.

Indicate any updates or changes to your information below:

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WANT TO BE MORE INVOLVED? CHECK BELOW!

- I want to join SPAN USA's Action E-List
- I want more information about becoming a Field Liaison or Quilt Organizer
- I would like more information on SPAN USA and suicide prevention
- Other: _____

MY CONTRIBUTION IS:

- \$50
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Survivors at the Heart of the Healing After Suicide Conference

On April 14, 2007, SPAN USA collaborated with the American Association of Suicidology (AAS) to host the 19th Annual Healing After Suicide Conference in New Orleans, La. Titled “Survivorship: Receiving, Giving Back,” the dynamic meeting brought together about 130 suicide survivors and clinicians from across the country to learn how to better navigate the healing journey that occurs after suicide.

The plenary speaker was Eric Hipple, a former NFL quarterback with the Detroit Lions. In 2000, after the tragic death of his 15-year-old son to suicide, Hipple shifted his public speaking to focus on awareness and treatment of

depressive disorders and suicide prevention.

The Healing After Suicide Conference continues to be an event designed by and for survivors; this year’s co-chairs were Franklin Cook and Michelle Linn-Gust. During an interview with New Orleans affiliate WWL-TV, Heidi Bryan, SPAN USA board member, shared that the “world as she knew it stopped” after the death of her brother, and she needed to talk about it. The Healing After Suicide conference is a place where many survivors of suicide gather to talk.

SPAN USA also had a presence throughout the full AAS conference. Jason Padgett, field development coor-

dinator, co-led the Strategic Planning for Suicide Prevention course during a pre-conference training workshop. In addition, Padgett and National Scientific Advisory Council member Yeates Conwell co-facilitated a roundtable discussion entitled “Engaging Survivors & Researchers.” Those who visited the SPAN USA booth were able to obtain newly generated legislative updates and population-based fact sheets, as well as information about the Lifekeeper program and details about becoming a SPAN USA Partner For Action.

Next year’s Healing After Suicide Conference will take place on April 18 in Boston. ■



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