

THE VANCOUVER SUN

WESTCOAST

EDITOR PAUL BUCCI 604-605-2445

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E-mail



Jude and Ben Platzter (founders of the Joshi Platzter Society for Teen Suicide Prevention and Awareness) hold a picture of their son Josh, who committed suicide seven years ago at the age of 15.

BREAKING THE SILENCE AROUND TEEN SUICIDE

PREVENTION | Speaking out can save lives of young people in crisis

WEEKEND
EXTRA

BY PAULA BROOK
VANCOUVER SUN

When Jude Platzter speaks to high school students about suicide prevention, she always starts out by saying something like, "I may cry. It happens sometimes, and might again today. Don't worry. I will collect myself very quickly and carry on."

She says this because she doesn't want the kids to worry — about her. But she does want them to worry about their friends. That's why she's there. She knows there are probably many among them

who warrant worrying about and doing something about, before it's too late.

That's what statistics tell her. In a survey of 15,000 B.C. high school students conducted recently by the Canadian Mental Health Association, 34 per cent knew of someone who had attempted or died by suicide; 16 per cent had seriously considered it themselves; 14 per cent had made a suicide plan; two per cent had required medical attention due to an attempt.

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TROUBLED KIDS JUST WANT TO END THE PAIN'

WEEKEND EXTRA FROM B1

About 30 teenagers die this way each year in the province, according to the B.C. Coroners Service, making suicide the second most common cause of death in young people after car crashes. In total, more than 500 teens and adults commit suicide each year in B.C. That's five times the homicide rate. Worldwide, more people die from suicide than from all homicides and wars combined, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). Yet we tend to hear and read so little about these lives quietly taken, and the shattered lives left behind.

That is what drives Jude Platzer into the classroom, especially at this time of the year. Tomorrow, September 10, is World Suicide Prevention Day. It kicks off a month-long campaign of awareness and prevention activities across the Lower Mainland, in which Jude and her husband, Ben Platzer, take a leading role each year. They are on a personal mission to make all those silent deaths count — by talking loudly about suicide, and teen suicides in particular, which are almost always preventable.

"Those kids know so little about life, they don't understand what's wrong with them and what can be done to help — they're just in pain," Jude told me last week. "They don't want to die, they just want to end the pain. There's a catch phrase: suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem."

It's not that Jude Platzer needs to fall back on statistics when she talks about suicide. It's not the numbers that make her cry, or that make kids in those classrooms listen so closely. It's what she says about her son Josh, who killed himself seven years ago at the age of 15.

The red-haired boy who is smiling in the framed photo on a wall in the Platzers' Kerrisdale home, seemed to have everything going for him: close friends, a busy social life, loving parents willing to do anything to make him happy — including finding him the medical help he needed when he started showing signs of depression in his early teen years.

What Josh's parents were not able to do, however, was break the code of silence that surrounded him, effectively locking them out of his deepest and most dangerous thoughts. He had talked with friends about his "suicide diary," for example, and had let a teacher in on his previous suicide attempt, but none of this got back to his parents. That was part of his plan, it seems. He wanted to shield them from his pain, and keep them off his trail.

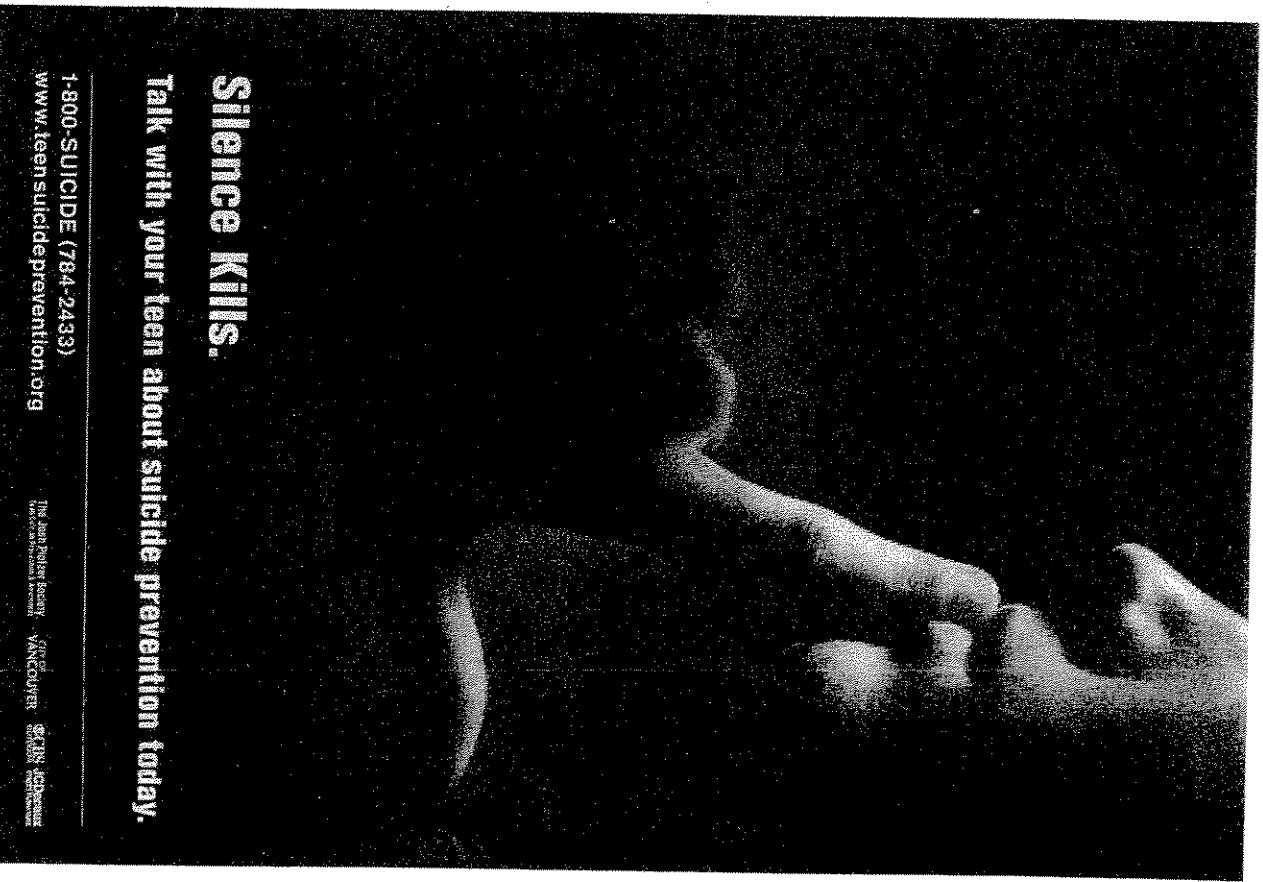
They knew he was suffering, but didn't know how badly. His eating and sleeping were erratic, his energy low. He would spend hours lying on his bed, listening to music through earphones.

"How do you recognize when your teen is just being a normal teen," says Jude, "as opposed to seriously depressed or even suicidal? Many teenagers do those things. Where do you draw the line?"

When your teen has a mood disorder, the line is much harder to draw. These are the teens — and adults — most at risk for suicide. WHO research shows that people who have a mental illness — most commonly depression, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia — are 10 times more likely to die this way than are people without an illness. Mental illness is the leading factor predisposing a person to suicidal behavior.

Still, only a small minority of people with mental illnesses do commit suicide. There are other risk factors, including life stressors and addictions, that combine to raise the risk to dangerous levels. Even then most of those afflicted are able to carry on, given timely care and support.

The Platzers were trying with Josh. His therapist had recommended antidepressants, and he took them for a while. Jude worried about this too: how do you monitor a secretive teen's medications? Josh's caregivers repeatedly cautioned his parents to back off — "to give him more space," recalls Jude, and her son took advantage of this. He humoured his mom, and kept her at a safe distance. She was reassured when, not long before he died, he asked her to refill the prescription because it was running low. She later found piles of discarded pills in a dresser drawer.



Silence Kills.

Talk with your teen about suicide prevention today.

1-800-SUICIDE (784-2433)

www.teen.suicideprevention.org

The Joint Police Society

City of Vancouver

877-967-9676

HANS SIPPA PHOTOGRAPHY

This poster is a creative donation to the Platzers' campaign by Wasserman & Partners Advertising, to be mounted on 10 bus shelters around Vancouver for the next month.

Common warning signs for suicide prevention

From Canadian Mental Health Association

- Sudden change in behaviour (for better or worse).
- Withdrawal from friends and activities.
- Lack of interest.
- Increased use of alcohol and other drugs.
- Recent loss of a friend, family member or pet, especially if they died by suicide.
- Conflicting feelings or a sense of shame about being gay or straight.
- Mood swings, emotional outbursts, high level of irritability or aggression.
- Feelings of hopelessness.
- Preoccupation with death, giving away valued possessions.
- Talk of suicide, eg, "no one cares if I live or die."
- Increased risk-taking.
- Writing or drawing about suicide, eg, in a diary.
- "Hero worship" of people who have died by suicide.

We need to do a lot more talking about mental illness as well, she points out. "There's a whole stigma about taking pills for something that's in your mind. There's this old attitude of 'Come on, you can do it!' I have a lot of trouble with that attitude, that you can do anything you want to do if you just try hard enough. Pull up your socks Johnny, best foot forward! It seems like a very positive message, but it isn't always so

positive. Not everybody is capable of that. Some kids, because of that message, get down. They feel they can't keep up, and in fact may be suffering emotional problems and be in need of support and afraid of looking weak if they ask for it.

There were times Josh let the façade slip, says Jude. "He would say to me, 'Mom, I get so far down in that dark hole I can't climb out.' He was very, very depressed. We did whatever we could. We did what we were told."

And they thought it was helping, right up to the end when his mood seemed suddenly to lighten, his little-boy smile reappearing more often. They know now this can be a serious warning sign. Any sudden change in mood is cause for concern, including happiness which may reflect the relief felt by someone who has finally made up his mind to end his suffering.

The Platzers thought he was simply better for having spent vacation time in England that summer, visiting relatives who had reported that Josh seemed upbeat and healthy. A few days after he arrived home he went to a friend's house to watch videos. He left at 10 p.m. but failed to return home. A frantic search ensued through the night. He was discovered early the next morning by a newspaper carrier, hanging from his friend's back porch.

"A lot of the signs were missed," says Jude seven years later, still choking back tears. She is calmer now than in the raw early years of her grief when she raged about all the things that might have been done, had

WEEKEND EXTRA

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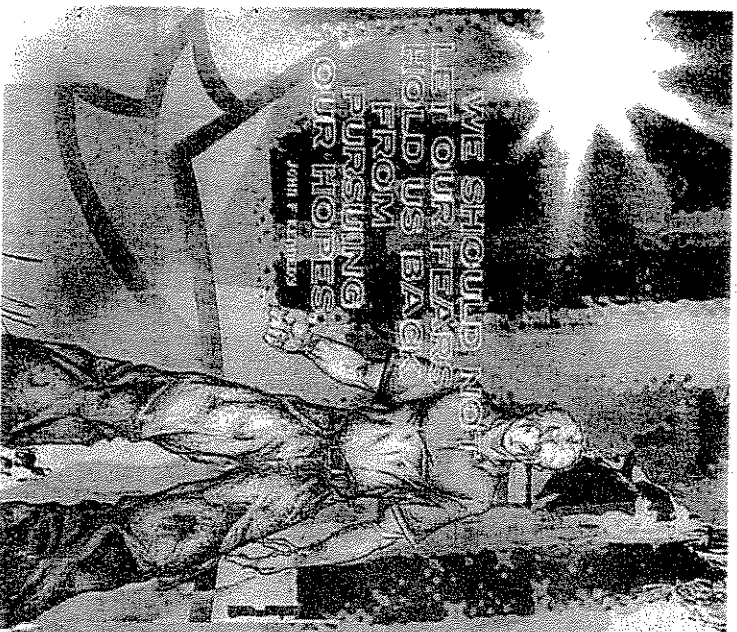
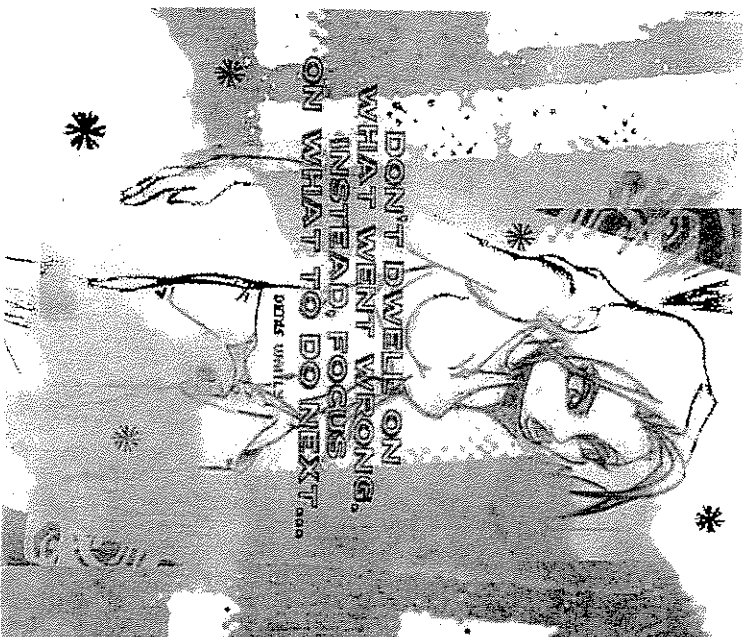


PHOTO: JOSH PLATZER

Above are a series of posters displayed on www.youthinbc.com, a website designed to help young people deal with their problems.

'SILENCE KILLS'

WEEKEND EXTRA FROM B2

the signs been read.

Now she works hard not to lay blame but to talk generally about the mistakes we all make. She appreciates the need for confidentiality between students and school counsellors, patients and doctors.

And she knows that a kid, especially one who is troubled, will typically share his problems with friends rather than with parents, and the friends will typically — in this case tragically — keep that secret safe.

"I don't want to point my finger at anyone, especially Josh's friends," she says. "They've suffered enough."

So she points her finger at society in general — at the dangerous silence around the subject. "Silence kills" is the message on the poster you'll see for the next month on bus shelters around Vancouver, funded by the Josh Platzer Society for Teen Suicide and Awareness, which Jude and Ben created in their son's memory.

"Talk with your teen about suicide prevention today," runs the rest of the text, under a provocative image that suggests both a "snishst" and a gun.

The poster gives the suicide hotline, 1800-SUICIDE (784-2433), and the Josh Platzer Society's web site, www.teen suicideprevention.org, which is linked to one of the best resources of its kind in Canada, www.youthinbc.com, a distress site for teens run by the Crisis and Suicide Prevention Centre of B.C. (better known simply as the Crisis Centre).

You can help by

- Really listening, without judging, not challenging, or becoming angry and shocked
- Finding ways to break through the silence and secrecy
- Asking if they have plans or have made prior attempts
- Helping them find ways to lessen their pain
- Helping them see positive possibilities in their future
- Gating them to other sources of help as soon as possible, such as a counsellor or other trusted adult, or community crisis lines listed in your telephone book

To get help

- SAER (Suicide Attempt Follow-up, Education and Research), a program of Vancouver Community Mental Health Services, 604-879-9251
- www.teen suicideprevention.org
- www.youthinbc.com
- www.crisiscentre.bc.ca
- www.onha.ca
- www.canadianteenhelpnetwork.ca

A staff of volunteer youth workers are online at the site from 4 p.m. to midnight seven days a week for live, one-on-one confidential chats on any issue that may be troubling teens.

IMAGES COURTESY OF WWW.YOUTHINBC.COM

The most pressing one, and the subject of about 30 per cent of the website's hits, is suicide. The Crisis Centre's distress line for adults, by comparison, has about 10 per cent of its calls about suicide.

Robin Shantz, Crisis Centre spokesman, says this is indicative of the difficulty teens face finding someone they feel safe talking with — and the numbers of those in need seem to be rising, he says.

"Self-harm is something our volunteers are hearing about more and more from kids," he tells me. "It's an alarming trend. Everyone is trying to figure out why we're seeing it."

The online service has expanded since it started two years ago, open for chats from four to eight hours a day, beyond which there is phone and e-mail access. But the chats are increasingly popular and, experts believe, most effective with youth.

At www.youthinbc.com, chats have increased from an average of 40 to 100 per month since its inception.

Their goal is to get the service up to 24 hours as soon as possible. "Problems don't conveniently crop up between four and midnight," Shantz says.

Jude's goal is to make suicide as talked-about in the future as cancer is today.

"I'm a nurse," she says, "and I can remember when we didn't even say the word, cancer. We called it the big C — and now the awareness is huge, and the funding for research and prevention.

"My goal is to get rid of the taboo around suicide and get on with prevention."