

Area Couple Discuss Mental Illness, Suicide at Nov. 19 AMH Presentation

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ALTON, IL – Although it's been several years since Tom and Fran Smith started working with families touched by suicide or mental illness, they're still amazed at the feelings of helplessness and isolation. Many people don't know where to turn for help. Others are too embarrassed to talk about it.

“People in the support groups will say, ‘I never realized so many people were going through the exact same thing as we were,’ ” Fran Smith says.

For the Smiths, “the exact same thing” is that their 26-year-old daughter, Karla, shot herself in 2003 after being diagnosed as bipolar or manic depressive. Tom and Fran later

joined with Karla's twin brother, Kevin, to create the Karla Smith Foundation, a non-profit organization. The Smiths lead support groups, fund counseling services and sponsor educational programs for families and friends of people who have died by suicide or have struggled with mental illness.

Tom and Fran Smith will be speaking at 6 p.m. Monday, Nov. 19, in the Alton Memorial Hospital cafeteria meeting rooms. Following their presentation, Dr. Scott Arbaugh of the AMH Center for Senior Renewal will conduct a clinical presentation on mental illness. The event is free and open to the public. Call 1-800-392-0936 to register. Light refreshments will be available.

"There are so many people who are impacted by mental health problems," said Tom Smith. "There are more than 35,000 suicides a year (in the United States)."

Bipolar disorder is one of the most common mental illnesses. It's characterized by periods of deep depression and high anxiety.

Family and friends knew Karla Smith as an intelligent, attractive and outgoing girl who enjoyed writing. But something changed her sophomore year at Oklahoma State University. She lost her energy and complained of not being able to write a book report.

"Within two months, Karla had dropped a couple of classes," Tom said. "She received incompletes in a couple more, and she ended up coming home without finishing the semester. She was very clearly in a deep depression."

A psychiatrist prescribed anti-depressants, kicking off a seven-year period of ups and downs with accompanying adjustments in medication. Karla attempted suicide several times and stayed in a mental hospital briefly. On Jan. 13, 2003, she fatally shot herself with a friend's .22-caliber rifle.

One of Karla's main passions in life was writing. At the time of her suicide, she had nearly completed her memoir, which she titled "Glue." The glue was a reference to the bipolar medication which held her together during periods of mania and depression. Her mission through her memoir was to educate others about what it felt like to live with a mental illness.

It is a result of Karla's mission and in her memory that Tom, Fran, and Kevin created the Karla Smith Foundation. It is through the family's openness that KSF connects with so many others facing the challenges of mental illness.

“The stigma of mental illness is starting to be erased through our conferences, workshops and through people becoming more willing to talk about mental illness,” says Tom Smith.

Karla Smith