

“Suzy’s Law”

Speaker: Mike Gonzales

From Suicide Prevention Summit, Enloe Hospital, Chico, CA

Moderator: Next we're going to have Mike Gonzales come and talk, and I...one of the incredibly nice parts of this whole project has been getting to know a variety of people, and Mike is certainly one of those. I personally became aware of Mike when I started hearing about this walk that he has brought to the North State, in Chico, and was very happy to meet him then and even happier when he became a part of the Suicide Prevention Task Force. Now I've got to tell you something about Mike. He brought his posse from Tehama County. He's on the mental health board up in Tehama County, and so when we break out into groups, we will have a Tehama County group. And I've talked to one of our later speakers, Katie Cassidy from Shasta County, and the three of us have already said that we need to collaborate on some of the campaigns, especially around TV, because, as you all know, we get all of our local news from the same two stations, where it's free.

[Laughter]

So anyway, we will be doing that. The other thing about Mike is that you get to know very quickly that he's very passionate, very willing to help. And what really amazes me about Mike and some of the others, especially Mike and the two speakers following, is that they have had suicide impact them. Mike is a survivor of suicide. His daughter was a victim of suicide, and he has taken this tragedy and really put energy into making sure he can help prevent it for other people. And that to me is just a real example, and it's a real honor to know Mike and to be able to work with him, so please welcome Mike. [Applause]

Mike Gonzales: Thank you. Hello everybody. Can everybody hear me? If I fade off and my voice becomes too soft or too loud, let me know. I have a tendency to get quiet when I'm talking, so I'll try to speak up and keep everybody in the back can hear me. First off, I would just like to say that I'm not a professional speaker. I'll do a lot of “uhs” and stops, and a lot of time I'll lose my train of thought, place, what I want to say, so please bear with me. The other thing is that I am not a trained mental health professional. The only training I have had is being a parent and being a suicide loss survivor. And as a suicide survivor, I'm talking about both those that have lost a loved one to suicide and those that have attempted suicide and survived, so I include everybody.

I – as I've said, I'm not a professional. I am now, since the death of my daughter, Suzanne, have become a suicide prevention advocate. I go out and talk and just relate what happened to my daughter, the circumstances around her death and what can be done to help prevent that from happening to others. So this is basically Suzanne's story here. “I love you, Dad, I'll see you soon.” Normally those words to parents will bring feelings of joy to your heart, a smile to your face, but those words were the last I heard from Suzanne – Suzy, as her friends called her. Hours later, alone and feeling very depressed, she went to a hotel room where she mixed a lethal mixture of poison, drank it, and ended her life. I found out about that in an email from her that was time delayed. Suzy was nineteen years old when she took her life in 2003. In fact, next Friday, March 23, it will be nine years to the day that we lost her and that's nine years since my life changed.

Suzanne was one of 31,484 who died that year, 2003, from suicide, and that number has risen to 36,909 for the 2009 data. And from what I have been reading and gathering information, which they're still trying to correlate for the 2010, that rate goes up to around 37,800. It is a climbing rate of suicide in the

United States. Suzanne was a good kid, and I say that, she was my daughter, she is my daughter, but she was a good kid. She was born here locally in Chico, right across the street at Enloe Hospital. And she grew up, the first half of her life, here in town going to the local school, McManus School. We lived just down the block from there. Then we moved to Red Bluff in a more rural setting, a very rural setting from where I live now. But she grew up to be a very bubbly nineteen-year-old, finished high school in the top of her class. She had a very infectious smile and a wonderful and quirky sense of humor. She was the kind of person who would go out of her way just to help others, and she was very bright and intelligent. She always brought a smile or laugh to her many friends and to her teachers, not to mention us, me and my wife and her sister. She loved to set her own style and was not afraid to march to her own crazy beat on things.

Suzie was a national Hispanic scholar finalist, and as such, she earned a four-year full-ride scholarship to Florida State University in Florida, and that's where she went to college. She made friends easily here in Chico and Red Bluff, and she made friends easily when she went to Tallahassee. She always made friends wherever she went, and she always applied herself fully to whatever she was doing. As a quirky sense of humor, she just...some of the examples I want to tell you about, she loved polka dots. She made her senior prom dress of full polka dots. She handpicked the material, she designed the dress herself, she took it to the seamstress, stood over the seamstress while she made it, and that's what she wore for her senior prom. She had a love of ska music, and that kind of dates...I'm not even sure if ska music is around anymore. And when in Florida, she was even known just to pull her car over on the side of the road in the middle of the night, get out, and go chase fireflies. She had that kind of a free spirit within her. She was always a joy and a bright light to be around.

It was while Suzanne was at college that she fell into depression. She hid her depression from us and her friends. She's one of those that I...one of those that suffered depression in silence. I call them the silent sufferers. On the outside, you see someone who appears completely happy, completely at ease and enjoying life. But on the inside, there was someone who was suffering, pain and despair and hopelessness.

So instead of turning to us or family or to professionals, she got online and did research, as any college student would. Unfortunately, online Suzanne found pro-suicide websites, sites that advocated ending your life. She expressed her depression and suicidal thoughts, and the reply back that she got was that suicide was a viable option and the only sure way to end any pain of depression. She was encouraged not to see any doctors, not to take medications, not to discuss with anyone her suicidal thoughts for fear of being locked up and forgotten. She was told to give up all hope of recovery or ever feeling happy again and just to look forward to a life-long series of pains of ups and downs and mostly downs, there was no way of getting out of it. They validated her feelings of depression and suicide.

At the end, when she was in one of these groups, she was targeted by a predator. I call him a suicide predator. It's just like any other predator that you hear about, a stalker predator, a child predator, a sexual predator. These predators go online and go to these rooms, these places, and these websites and look for those most vulnerable, those that they feel they can manipulate to end their own lives. And they help them by giving them encouragement and instructions, and just take away all sense of survival. This one predator targeted her online, became her friend, became a sort of mentor to her on how to end her life and on dying. He preyed on her altered mental state and keeping in close contact with her. All this was done online. He kept her focused on killing herself. This predator provided emotional support, encouragement. He even proofread and edited her suicide note to make sure that no one could stop her from dying, that she needed to die. He was even online talking with her up to the moment that

she left her apartment to go to the hotel room to kill herself. He knew exactly where she was at, what she was doing, what she was going to use, and did nothing but encourage it. And afterwards, no remorse. He celebrated online. He was her only true friend, he said, but she needed to die, and he was proud to help her.

When Suzy died, as you can well imagine, a part of me died as well. My world was shattered, and the terror that I felt when I found out of her death is indescribable. And after finding out that she died by suicide, all those questions started flooding in that I'm sure many people that lost someone have experienced -- what did I miss, how could I have missed it, what if I did this differently? What ifs, what ifs. And why, why didn't she come to me for help?. I was her dad. I was supposed to protect her from harm. She didn't give me that chance. Instead, she went...was influenced by this predator who became sort of a surrogate father figure to her in her depressed mental state.

All those questions, what ifs, and whys. All those that have lost a loved one all react differently to that loss, but one thing that we do have in common is that all of us will live the rest of our lives with that pain and loss that we have experienced. I have been asked many times, how do I handle the hurt and pain that I must experience when I talk about Suzy's death and if the pain ever goes away. All I can say is, for me, the pain never does. The pain of losing her is still as painful and raw as it was nine years ago, but I have learned to live with it. It is now a part of me. The pain is there. It will never go away, as I said, but I have moved forward to try to help others from experiencing what she went through and what we went through because of this. Not to say that I don't have times when I am overwhelmed with emotions; that I break down. I often describe these times, these times as sort of an emotional tsunami. Something triggers a memory of Suzanne, and I can feel my emotions kick in. I can feel them build up inside of me. It's like that tsunami wave coming at you. The closer it gets, the taller it gets, the more smaller you feel. You have no control over it, and then it hits, and I'm lost in a sea of emotions, of thoughts, of memories, but then it starts to recede, and I can continue on once it's over. I'm sure a lot of you that have lost a child, a parent, a friend may experience the same thing.

For me, it's little things that remind me of my daughter, Suzy, things like time, visual time. She had a thing about the same digit, 1:11 in the afternoon, 3:33. How many times do you look at a clock and you see those, and that triggers a memory? Or the mathematical symbol pi and the digits 3.14, Suzanne loved math and loved science, and for some reason she loved the number "pi." She had it on her ringtone, on her phone. There are two songs that I still cannot listen to on the radio to this day. Music triggers those memories. I have to turn the radio off and wait an amount of time to make sure that the music is over, the songs are over. They are the songs from the Lion King. She loved that movie. And the other song is James Taylor, "Fire and Rain." And if you've ever listened to the lyrics carefully, when the first verse goes, "Just yesterday morning they let me know you were gone, Suzanne the plans they made put an end to you, I walked out this morning, and I wrote down this song, I just can't remember who to send it to." That verse was about Taylor's friend named Suzanne, and she died by suicide.

As my wife and I found out about the details surrounding Suzy's death, about her depression, about her involvement with pro-suicide sites on the internet and about the suicide predators, we were startled, horrified, and we wanted to do something so other people did not have to suffer this. We started to talk about what happened to her. We told people. We tried to find out how to prevent this to others.

We spent nearly two years of asking questions and researching, but the thing we found out from law enforcement, from legal firms, that there are no laws that deal with assisting suicide through the internet. There are absolutely no laws that deal with it, so people that, these predators that do prey on

others can do it so without any fear of legal recourse. They have the...to me, they have a free reign to commit murder just because there are no legal definitions that deal with this. The law enforcement that I've talked to want to do things. They want to be able to charge these people, but there are no laws that deal with it so they can charge them with any sort of crime.

Once we found that out, my wife and I decided to change that or try to change that. We went to our congressman, Wally Herger, who was about to retire. He was horrified as a parent of many children about what happened and that is still continuing to happen. He and his staff researched and drafted a bill that would make it a crime for someone to use the internet to promote or encourage suicide. I call it Suzy's Law. Technically, it's a bill, but I call it Suzy's Law. I look for...as a positive envision of it. In its current form, it's known as HR 1183. I believe the text of the bill, as written, is a narrow and specific bill. It's not a broad abridgment of the freedom of speech. That was one of the things I made clear to Congressman Herger. It cannot infringe on freedom of speech. It specifically makes it a crime to go on the internet and tell someone who seems to be thinking of suicide, yeah, you should go ahead, go through with this, here's how to do it and where to get the materials or knowledge to do that. It deals specifically with those people who provide information that is generally not known or provide materials or resources to someone who is suicidal and is likely to die by suicide with that provided help.

When we first introduced the bill to congress in the year 2006, I thought it was going to be a simple no brainer. I was wrong. I have learned that good intentions and the political process do not go hand in hand. There is a lot that I had to learn about the political process and DC and how laws are made and passed. And just as a brief, short class, I wish they taught me this in high school better or I paid attention more. Once a bill is introduced to the house by a representative, your local representative or another representative, it's assigned a number, an HR number, House of Representatives, as an example, HR 1183. The bill is assigned a number, then it's assigned to a committee, the appropriate committee. From the committee, it usually goes to the subcommittee. And once in the subcommittee, it's discussed and examined. But in order to get out of the subcommittee, they would like to have about fifty other congressional members cosign, cosponsor the bill -- saying there's enough interest, that we should discuss this more. If they get enough cosigners, cosponsors, and they discuss it and they vote on it, it goes to the committee. They do the same thing. They discuss it, examine it. They vote on it. If it passes the committee, it goes to the House floor for a vote. If it's passed on the House floor, it goes to the Senate where it goes to committee and goes to subcommittee, back to committee, back to Senate. And if it passes both the house and senate and there's no argument about it, it goes to the president for his signature.

So in this political climate, it's been hard to convince representatives to support this bill. And I have to say that every...the bill has to do this, the House side and the Senate side, in a two-year time frame. So every two years, if the bill's not passed, it has to be resubmitted. We start from scratch. You have to build support. You have to get the cosponsors. And you can see how that takes time if it's not a popular bill or it's a controversial bill. Suzy's Law currently is coming to its last year on its third congressional session, and I truly doubt it will be passed this year, but we will find another author and have it reintroduced.

Even though it has not passed, I think the bill has been successful in something. It has been increasing awareness of suicide and depression to our political Representatives and Senators. The more I advocate for this bill, the more I tell people about this bill, the more they hear about it in DC. I believe that knowledge is power and that the people who know more about this danger, about these suicide predators – that makes these suicide groups and predators less effective and also helps to put more

pressure on the political leaders in our government. If advocating for Suzy's Law helped prevent just one other person from becoming a victim of a suicide predator, then I consider the effort well spent. I continue to advocate for this bill, and I will do so in DC and in this state, in any state as long...until nobody asks me about it, nobody tells me something very similar happened to them.

I've talked to many people in many similar circumstances. Some, almost exact same steps happened to them, so I know it's a growing problem. It's a big problem out there. As I've been gathering support over these last nine years, six years, I've also become involved in suicide prevention at local and state levels. I have involved myself in my local county prevention efforts and mental health efforts, and I've gained support of various nonprofit suicide prevention organizations. One of them is the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. One of their main efforts, programs, is the Out of the Darkness walk, community walks for suicide prevention and depression awareness. This year, we're going to have our third year here in Chico, and it's going to be held on October 27 at City Plaza. Before we had our first walk here, the nearest walk was in Sacramento. It's time to bring it up...we figure, us, myself and a group of other concerned citizens in Chico decided it was time to bring it up into rural California, up to Chico, up to Redding, up to...remember the slide of all the red counties, the high suicide rates. So we bring the walk up to promote awareness of suicide prevention and depression. I have attended...over the years, I have attended many of the Out of Darkness walks here in California from Chico to San Diego as well as other prevention events to tell people about Suzy, about Suzy's Law, what my family and I have gone through. In return, I get to talk to many, many, many other people that have gone through the loss of a loved one or attempted suicide themselves. I have heard their stories. I've heard of people losing a child, a parent, a friend, a coworker, a teacher. Every person has their own way of telling what happened to them, of what they experienced and how they felt and how they are feeling. It could be many years later.

I had one lady tell me about the death of her twin sister, and she was very quiet, very elderly -- 80s, I would guess. And after she told me all this, she just looked at me and said, thank you, I have never told anybody about this since my sister died. So that walk...I've come to realize just the simple act of talking and listening helps a great many people. Sometimes something so simple as having someone to listen to what you've been holding in by being able to talk about it without worrying about being judged, knowing that someone else can understand what you have gone through or are going through provides relief and comfort to people. So I talk and I listen, not as a professional. As I've said, I have no formal training in this, but I do listen. And as a suicide survivor, I do understand, it helps me, and I believe it helps others listening and being able to tell, and that's what I like, I love about these Out of Darkness walks. It gathers people together, like-minded people together, and they are able to relate and tell people what happened and not feel uncomfortable about it. And just to get that off their chest, to be able to vent a little bit, helps.

So I would like to, in closing, I would like to thank you for allowing me to talk, and I would like to thank you for listening to me, to what I had to say. We are all here for the same reasons, and I thank you for that, for being here. This is just a fantastic turnout. As has been stated, like-minded people tend to gather together, and from the turnout here, I see I'm in great company.

Back at the AFSP table, I have information on the programs that the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention provides throughout the state. You can gather as much information as you would like. I have a limited supply of just showing of the DVDs on teen suicide, college-age suicide, physician suicide. If you would like a copy, just let me know, and I will obtain them for you. That's part of what we do. Part of the walk here in Chico is to gather funds that we can give back into the community. Part of that would be the DVDs, and trainings or programs that the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention provides. So

just come on back there, or I will tell you more about Suzy's Law, where we're at, and what we're planning to do. So...questions? Yes, ma'am?

Audience member: So we heard [inaudible] Suzy. Nothing happened to that person? No punishment? No...that was totally not, I mean, there's just no law? That person...

Mike Gonzales: Correct. The question is, what happened to the predator that targeted Suzanne?

Audience member: Yes.

Mike Gonzales: I was able to find out who he was. I know where he lives. I know his name. He's married. He has a son a year younger. Nothing could be...no charges could be brought against him. This is the type of person...he even posted online that he...this is what he posted himself, that if his son decided to kill himself, he would encourage him and help him wherever he could. And he's still out there, and I know he's tried with others just because I have had several contact me. One was a young lady, young female, suicidal, depressed. This predator became her friend and did the same thing, building this rapport with her, becoming the surrogate person, telling her he was going to kill himself too, they should do it together. And he ended up saying, I bought too much of a deadly chemical, pharmaceutical drugs, when you're ready, I'll send them to you because I'm your friend. No charge. She had a change of heart right then. She contacted me and let me know about it, but nothing could be done. Any other questions? Yes, ma'am?

Audience member: What can we do to help support Suzy's Law?

Mike Gonzales: Right now...

Audience member: [Inaudible]

Mike Gonzales: Yes, sir. I will. The question is, what can be done to help support Suzy's Law. The biggest thing is to contact your congressional representative. As I mentioned, Congressman Herger is the person that authored the bill. His name is already on the bill. If you have family, friends, relatives out of the second, what is now the second congressional district, or out of state, contact them to contact their congressional representatives and ask them to support the bill by becoming a cosponsor. At the very least, this bill needs, and what it stands for, it needs to be discussed in the halls of congress. I went back, and my wife and I went back to DC and literally walked the halls. We made a bunch of appointments, about a dozen appointments to visit congressmen, congress people, the representatives, and the senators. There was only about a dozen. When we ended, we ended up with forty-plus visits, We went and knocked on doors and walked in, and I was shocked because the vast majority of them never heard of this problem, never knew it existed, and they thanked me for telling them, but they said, we want to hear from our constituents, the voters, on what to [inaudible]. Fair enough.

So I go, what I can, to the voters and ask them, tell them what happened, and ask them to support the bill. I have some literature, pamphlets, and information. I have a website online that gives all this information about what happened to Suzanne and about the bill verbatim, the wordage of the bill, and we continue on to try to support it. We are getting support from various congressmen, congress representatives. It takes a great deal of them, and like I mentioned before, political climate, reelection, it deals with what they feel is two words that they're afraid of. They feel it infringes on freedom of speech until I explain to them or it deals with the internet and suicide. Those three things make them real

nervous. We try to explain to them and tell them it's going on. They are there to help pass laws that will protect the citizens of the country, and this is a growing phenomenon. The internet is everywhere. It's persuasive in high school, social media, texting. It's there. Yes?

Audience member: This is kind of...I don't know if it's silly or what, but I saw an episode on Criminal Intent, and it was all about a suicide website and [inaudible] website, you know, actually encouraged these five teenagers to kill themselves. I don't know if this is based on a true story or what, but the district attorney and everybody, they were able to get them...his standing was...okay. This [inaudible] He said, wait a minute, wait a minute. If a man is bleeding on the side of the road and you do not think that's criminal, you have to, you know...

Mike Gonzales: You're right.

Audience member: So there was something in there, and they were able to get his website and take it down because any solution or any help, you know, if you are thinking suicide...

Mike Gonzales: Right.

Audience member: ...and he didn't offer any help but go to this suicide prevention web...he did nothing like that, everything was promoting...

Mike Gonzales: Right.

Audience member: ...or helping them commit suicide, so they were able to get that website taken down, so...

Mike Gonzales: The comment was, a television show episode that dealt with suicide, assisted suicide versus through the internet, on the show. Unfortunately, it's TV. They get to take great liberties of what they produce. They...as far as I know, they cannot take down any website. Even the bill, Suzy's Law, HR 1183 does not affect websites, internet providers, books, movies, TV's talking about it. It deals specifically with those predators, those people that target others, going and giving information, encouragement to end their lives and give them that information. Unfortunately, they...he's giving me thirty seconds. I already get the famous hook.

[Laughter]

Mike Gonzales: So I'll be here all day. If anybody has more questions, come back and find me. Thank you very much.

[Applause]