

UNIMAGINABLE LOSS

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The previous evening had been lovely, Kathy Kiser recalled. No squabbles or tears among the three children. She and Ruth, the oldest, worked on a school project that winter night.

So the next morning, when Kathy tried to wake 8-year-old Ruth for school and discovered she had died during the night, she assumed a horrendous accident had occurred. Hours later, the suicide notes were discovered under Ruth's pillow. She had taken an overdose of pills from the medicine cabinet.

The third-grader had one final request for her parents.

Bury me with my Cabbage Patch doll, she told her mom in a note.

And so her grief-wracked parents did.

Suicide among children younger than 10 is rare but increasing nationwide. How much of the increase can be attributed to the accurate reporting of these acts is unclear – often such deaths are listed as accidents, either to comfort the family or because young children are considered incapable of taking their own lives.

Ruth's death was ruled accidental, but Kathy Kiser never shied from the truth. Over the years, she talked about her daughter's death at area support groups for families dealing with the loss of their children.

The groups of grieving parents helped the Prince George County resident find her footing for an uphill journey paved with pain.

"A lot of the feelings I had were because she was gone. But not how she went," said Kathy, whose world shattered when she and her husband, John Taise Kiser, buried their daughter 18 years ago.

Ruth Ellen was named after her maternal and paternal grandmothers. Her inquisitiveness and willfulness were apparent early on. She learned how to swim before she could walk.

"It was wonderful to go places with her. People were mesmerized," recalled Kathy, whose hazel eyes brightened at the memory.

Ruth was only 2 1/2 when she tried to change her dad's tire. The Kisers captured the amusing adventure on film.

John Kiser, who built the family's log home, said he passed on his mechanical genes to his daughter, who enjoyed handing him tools and quizzing him about how things worked. By 7, she was driving his golf cart on the family's 40-acre property east of Hopewell.

A favorite memory of his involves the county's first Heritage Fair. Cars were parked far from the booths, including one where he cooked pork chops to raise money for the Burrowsville Ruritan Club. Ruth would zip by on her father's golf cart every now and then, sometimes with passengers. To his amusement, Ruth later told him she charged folks a quarter to ride.

Kathy said Ruth caught on quickly and was placed in gifted classes at North Elementary School, where she made friends easily. Some spent the night in their home.

She was also very sensitive.

"She hurt for other people," as well as herself, Kathy recalled. "I could feel her across the room sometimes when someone said something ... that could hurt her feelings."

Ruth also tended to get overly angry. Counseling started about six months before her death.

"She had said something to her brother about harming me," Kathy said. "I knew she didn't hate me."

"Later, I read a child that age is used to having their needs met by parents. If a child is not getting something taken care of, the parent is the one who is blamed. She was in mental or psychological pain. She was so verbal it amazes me it never got said."

Ruth's parents had no idea her pain was so intense. Not knowing made them re-examine everything later.

"So often you are being eaten up with the `what-ifs,'" John said. "What if I had done this or that? The morning she died I got up to go to work at 6. Either she was crossways in bed or on the floor, neither of which was unusual."

"I picked her up, put her back in the bed and there was some red stuff on her cheeks. It looked like ice cream sprinkles. I thought she had gotten into candy. As I put her back in bed, I noticed some pieces of paper on her pillow, which I didn't think anything of. I noticed her eyes were open just a tiny bit. I remembered thinking, `Is she playing a game with me?' When Kathy got up 30 minutes later, she was dead and the red stuff was from some capsules she had taken."

"It was like if I had picked up the papers I would have realized what was going on. Or if I had questioned why her eyes weren't closed tightly. But I'm all in that go-to-work mode, and nothing in the world makes you think something like this will happen to you," John said.

Experts say young children do not always realize that what they are doing is permanent. Ruth died 16 days before her 9th birthday.

She included a will with her suicide notes leaving \$100 to \$200 of her bank savings to her 4-year-old brother, James, and the rest to help pay for funeral costs.

She also wrote a note to another teacher asking her to send notices home with her classmates inviting them to her funeral. In a postscript, she asked the teacher not to let the children read the notices until they were home.

Many of the youngsters attended the funeral, although they did not know the circumstances of Ruth's death, Kathy said.

The children sent her cards, writing such sentiments as "We miss Ruth" and "Sorry she's gone," and it helped a great deal, Kathy said.

Later, Ruth's third-grade teacher went to the school's library to get some books on dealing with death, but there wasn't anything there, Kathy said.

"With the money people had sent to us after Ruth died, we bought several books and donated them to the school in memory of Ruth – things appropriate and available then, such as `The Fall of Freddy the Leaf' and `The Secret Worry,'" Kathy said.

A list of warning signs for suicide might include the behavior of a typical child: irritability or sadness, a drop in grades or the withdrawal from friends or a favorite activity. But clusters of such behaviors that continue for days may also signal depression and should be followed up with action.

Kathy doesn't think Ruth was depressed. But then she doesn't recall that too much attention was paid to the topic of childhood depression in the mid-1980s.

Still, she found herself conducting a "psychological autopsy" for years.

Kathy recalls that shortly before Ruth died, she had brought home her report card. There was a column for her to rate herself.

"She had rated herself 1s and 2s, and the teacher rated her much stronger with 4s and 5s. After the fact, I realized that showed how she felt about herself at the time. She didn't have a bad report card as far as the teacher were concerned. That part of it told me something was going on. It would have been nice to know it was a flag."

Guilt, as with many parents of children who died from suicide, haunted the Kisers for years.

Kathy has replayed her last night with her daughter countless times.

"We had a really good evening, working on a school project. It was a lovely evening, because later on I thought if we had a fight, then I would have been sure it was my fault."

After Ruth died, Kathy and John realized there may have been two earlier attempts Ruth made to harm herself.

Once she rode her bike to Hopewell without permission to visit her grandmother. She later said a car had almost hit her, but Kathy thinks she may have intentionally ridden in front of the car.

Another time, Kathy walked into Ruth's bedroom and found her using a pocketknife to cut a cord she had placed around her neck.

"I explained you don't tie things around your neck and you don't play with a pocketknife," Kathy recalled. At the time, she assumed it was an accident.

Kathy carried Ruth's suicide notes in her pocketbook for a couple of years. "It was the last thing she wrote. I had to have them with me."

She is aware of other parents who did the same thing, she said. Since then, she has kept the four scraps of yellow loose-leaf paper tucked in a drawer and, until recently, had not read them in years.

To cope with Ruth's death, Kathy briefly attended Survivors of Suicide, and she went to Compassionate Friends for 15 years, including the last 10 as a co-leader for the Hopewell chapter.

The organization "provides a place to tell their story. Everyone needs to tell their story until they no longer need to tell their story," she said.

It was at a meeting that she heard how losing a child is analogous to losing one's arm.

"You can do everything in your life with one arm, just about," Kathy said. "But you will never be a two-armed person again. Even if they come along with a prosthesis you can put on and new people don't know the arm is missing, you know. Your life is changed forever."

For Kathy, Compassionate Friends provided a place she could talk about Ruth. John Kiser never attended a meeting but supported his wife's decision to go. He would help watch the kids or arrange a baby sitter.

John, like many fathers, grieved differently from his wife. He kept busy at work to keep from disappearing into his thoughts.

"Maybe it's a guy thing," he said. "We think we can fix things if you work long and hard enough. This was something I didn't know how to fix."

Coping was harder for Kathy, he said. "We guys can work and get it out of our minds for a while. But with the emotional nature of women, it doesn't go away. It still doesn't go away for all of us. I remember the first time I realized I hadn't thought about Ruthie all day and then I felt

guilty. Whether that was six months or a year, I almost felt like I had let her down. But you got to go on."

And so they did.

Kathy says she wasn't the mother she needed to be for Liz and James for about a year. Her emotions pushed her "in a place where you can't hurt anymore. You don't feel pain. ... A numbing comes along."

After Ruth died, Kathy had to grapple with a question that vexes every parent of a dead child: How many children do you have?

"It's quite a tough question. For a long time I decided I would not leave her out. Then I realized people aren't really listening, so I might say I have three children and I might not go into specifics. At some point it became unnecessary to do that. Now I say I have two children."

James was 4 and Liz 2 1/2 when Ruth died. When Liz was about 6, her teacher, who had been Ruth's, called the Kisers. She was worried that Liz was mimicking some of Ruth's behaviors.

Kathy can't recall Liz's specific actions, but she was grateful for that call. "Because of Ruth, [the teacher] knew the flags. We ran to the psychiatrist. It wasn't even a 'maybe we will' or 'maybe we won't' because we knew whatever we had done before had not been enough."

Children who had a sibling who died of suicide are much more likely to contemplate or complete suicide, studies have found.

Both children were watched closely as they grew. Neither would show significant problems, and early on, James' ability to sail through turbulent waters surfaced.

One of the Kisers' favorite stories involves 5-year-old James' celebration of what would have been Ruth's 10th birthday.

"Jamie wanted to go to the cemetery," Kathy recalled. "He gathered flowers from the yard and placed them on the grave. On the way home he asked, 'Well, are we going to have a cake?' I told him no, we don't have birthdays for people who are dead. Before I could finish my thought, he said, 'But mom, George Washington has been dead a long time and we still celebrate his birthday.'"

"I went home and made a cake from a mix Ruth had picked out the last time she went shopping with me. I didn't dare throw it away. And I realize that's what it was there for. On the cake he had me write, 'Happy birthday, Ruth. Sorry you're not here.'"

When she recalls that incident, she can't help but wonder, "What is it that's different between these two kids? He figured out what to do to help him. He had a coping mechanism she didn't."

For years she wondered what triggered Ruth's death. Could the death of Ruth's grandfather from cancer when she was 6 had a bearing in any way?

"He was in a lot of pain, and so many people could have commented [at the funeral] on how peaceful he looked and he was no longer in pain." Kathy said. "I'm sure it was said often."

She often wondered "if that was something she latched on to as a way out of pain."

She often wondered if an after-school special about suicide that Ruth had discussed with her mother weeks before her death influenced her.

She often wondered how she failed her daughter.

"In some ways it will always be my fault," Kathy said. "Some part of being a parent is to keep your child alive."

Today Kathy is past much of the hurt that paralyzed her immediately after Ruth's death.

She is pleased with her children.

"I consider myself lucky to have the two kids I have. They're wonderful. They've managed to grow up and move out into the world as decent human beings regardless of not having the mother I wanted them to have."

Kathy recently read a quote that recharged her outlook: "In your life are you landing or taking off?"

"I decided I'm taking off. I'm not sure on what, but I'm working on choosing a destination. The kids are gone. Liz is at John Tyler Community College and James is working as a millwright."

Her attitude is a "combination of menopause, empty-nest syndrome and realizing my life is two-thirds over," she said one glorious afternoon last month as she sat in the lunchroom of the Prince George Education Center, an alternative school for troubled students. She is a secretary there.

She credits her job at the school with helping her rediscover herself. She joined the school's staff in 2000 and soon noticed internal changes.

"For a lot of years, a part of me was sure I didn't deserve fun or joy or any positive, lighthearted emotion. When I went to work, I realized I was laughing differently, from a deeper part of me. For many years, the best I could manage was a smile, and I may not have meant that. Some of it was related to Ruth.

"I got stuck living in a way I could manage at the time. I'm sure fear had a lot to do with it. If anyone really knew why that portion of your brain that should say 'me first,' why that's not there for people who choose suicide, that would help me. My biggest fear after her death was to confirm it was my fault.

"Over time I became intellectually convinced that question isn't even pertinent – why someone does it. Suicide doesn't happen in one day, it's a long buildup. At some point someone decides that's the only way I can stop pain.

"There was never going to be a specific answer to why. There was never going to be a satisfying answer to that question. But still I had a gut-level feeling maybe I did something or maybe I didn't or maybe someone else did something. For me that meant there was a lot of fear about how I raised my other children. You're scared you will do the wrong thing and have no clue what the wrong thing is, and it just makes life hard."

Today, Kathy tries to make life easier for others. She is helping a man learn how to read as a volunteer with the Literacy Council.

This year she helped bring a suicide prevention program to her school.

On a pleasant afternoon in August, she briefly addressed the school's staff on the warning signs of suicide.

"I said I had this child, Ruth, and she died when she was almost 9 from completing suicide. I told them some of the teachers had called about five years later when Liz was in that grade and they were seeing the same behaviors. They knew something needed to be attended to because they had this knowledge from living through Ruth's life and death.

"There were flags they saw and they acted on them, and that's why we have [this program] to know what the flags are. It's important to know what to be aware of and know what to do in the event you see them."

Getting the suicide-prevention training at her school, the first in Prince George, made her feel "like I've done something," Kathy said. "That's for Ruth. It's the difference that she made. No one wants anyone they love to die in vain. You have to sometimes make an attempt to see a positive aftermath. You have to make positive things come."

Eighteen years have passed since Ruth died by her own hand. Her mother's actions may keep other youngsters from doing the same. It's a thought Kathy cherishes as she continues a new journey, one paved with possibilities, not pain.

Facts

- 24 Virginia youngsters ages 10 to 17 died from suicide in 2001.
- It is the fifth-leading cause of death for people ages 10 to 17 nationwide.
- Suicide among young children is rare but there has been a dramatic increase in the rate among 10-to-14-year-olds nationwide.

ILLUSTRATION: Photo

MEMO: When a child dies: Everlasting loss

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