

My Year of Being Brave

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June 2, 2020 - Ten years ago, I was planning my suicide. I never imagined I would survive the attempt, let alone that I would become an advocate for suicide prevention on both the state and federal levels, finding a passion in pushing for smarter mental health policies and in helping others to find hope.

My mother was involved in advocating for the rights of those with disabilities after my sister Maria was born in 1987 with multiple profound disabilities. As a child, my mother would bring me to watch the last night of the legislative session at the state Capitol. I wasn't fully aware of what was happening, but I loved the pomp and circumstance, the din of discourse echoing off the grand architecture, and meandering the marble halls.

I live in a small town in West Virginia, just minutes from our capital city of Charleston. The winter months are often difficult for me, faced with the added challenge of managing seasonal depression. In the immediate aftermath of my

suicide attempt in 2010, I broke free from an abusive relationship, and began to regularly see a psychiatrist, which I still do.

Even now, a decade after my attempt, I struggle with depression, anxiety, and PTSD. As time has gone on, through the support of my husband, family and friends, and with the help of medications and techniques I've learned in therapy, I am better able to manage my symptoms.

Feeling in a good place with my mental well-being this January, I decided this was going to be "my year of being brave."

It began when I attended the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention's [State Capitol Day](#) in West Virginia in January – an event in which volunteer [Field Advocates](#) for AFSP have the opportunity to meet with their local legislators, share their personal connection to suicide, and encourage them to make suicide prevention a [public policy priority](#).

I was surprised to discover that, despite my hesitation as an introvert, I *actually enjoyed* meeting with our state senators and representatives, using my voice and personal experience to advocate for change. I impressed myself with my confidence that day, and I wasn't ready to quit.

And so, with a new motto, a newly rekindled passion for advocacy, and an important bill regarding suicide prevention education for school personnel, I began collecting materials and packing folders to meet with representatives and their staff. The bill, SB230, would require that all personnel who have direct contact with students at schools in West Virginia be trained to recognize the [warning signs for suicide](#) and play a role in suicide prevention.

Nearly every weekday, I would arrive at the Capitol at 8:00 a.m., walk the halls to deliver folders containing important issue briefs, and attend either the House or Senate session. Almost everyone I met with during that time disclosed that suicide had in some way touched them, or someone close to them. The truth is that [suicide is indiscriminate and widespread in our state](#), where it is the 10th leading cause of death, making it both a critical and nonpartisan issue.

I was walking back down the hallway after a morning of impromptu meetings, and heard one of the older members asking every woman passing by, "Are you the suicide prevention lady?" I approached, introduced myself, and asked how I could help. He stated that he didn't know anyone who thought about or had died by suicide, but that people need to feel like they are a part of something, and that they belong.

We spoke a little more before I shared the story of my own suicide attempt. I can't explain the look on his face as he looked into my eyes and said, "You?" After I told him my own story, he shared with me that someone close to him had indeed attempted suicide, and that he'd never told anyone before.

In that moment, I knew I was exactly where I was meant to be. By being open and vulnerable myself, I had given someone else the space to be vulnerable with me. By sharing that my connection with suicide prevention was personal and not merely professional, we were able to have a #RealConvo.

The passage of our bill came down to the final hours on the last night of the 60-day assembly. I wasn't worried about the proposal passing, as I knew we had the support, but I was still on the edge of my seat as the bill was read and the delegates began to vote. Two columns of green lights filled the voting boards, as vote after vote chimed in. My heart swelled with pride as the bill was declared passed. Friends from the floor looked up to the gallery with a thumbs up, or texted me with congratulations.

I was far from alone in my work to get the measure passed, and we know there's still work to do to make it more sturdy, including strengthening the curriculum for school personnel to learn about suicide prevention – education we know will save lives. But the relationships forged and the confidence I've built this year have been monumental in further cementing my passion for being an advocate for suicide prevention.

Ten years ago, I didn't see myself anywhere – certainly not where I am today. But here I am, and I'm here to stay. I've found my voice, and I'm not stopping until I'm heard.

