

(By CHANDRA R. THOMAS)

More Georgians
take their own
lives each year
than are victims
of murder. Dozens
of advocacy groups
are committed to
raising awareness
of this public
health crisis.

**SUICIDE
MISSION**

Photographs by PATRICK MOLNAR



"I was always worried about him buckling up [his seatbelt] or driving cross-country alone, when I should have been worried about how he was feeling," says Gina Smallwood of her son Kelvin, a college honors student, who took his own life on February 23.

Suddenly on February 23, 2008, a cloud of tragedy and sadness swept across the land and yesterday's promise of tomorrow faded with the sunset. ¶ The words printed on a funeral program describe the incomprehensible—a grieving mother's take on the day her teenage son's life came to an abrupt end. In hindsight, Gina Smallwood remembers many odd things about that day less than two weeks before Kelvin Mikhail Smallwood-Jones would have celebrated his twentieth birthday. There was the moment, about thirty miles into her 700-mile drive to Washington, D.C., when she reached under the seat of her Volkswagen Cabrio and realized that she had left the .40 caliber pistol that she usually took on the road for protection locked inside her bedroom. Then there was that eerie wave of emotion that flooded through her shortly after 5:30 p.m. when, while still on the road, she was captivated by a sunset bursting with streaks of coral, gold, and magenta. "I thought to myself, 'God, you really wanted me to see this [sunset]," she says. "Then I felt this rush of emotion gush out of my body; it almost felt like I was having a baby."

Nothing had seemed out of the ordinary earlier that day, 9:50 a.m. to be exact, when Kelvin had called to say, "I love you."

"He knew I was traveling, and it wasn't uncommon for him to check on me," recalls Smallwood.

She wasn't even alarmed when, a little before 8 p.m., Kelvin's girlfriend, Stacy*, a senior at Clark Atlanta University, called to let her know that the two had had an argument and Stacy was concerned because Kelvin hadn't answered his phone for hours. Smallwood knew the young couple had their share of spats. A few hours later, the long drive over, Smallwood had reached her cousin's D.C. home. Although she was exhausted, an unsettling feeling kept her

from falling asleep. "I called him a couple of times and he never called back," she says. "That wasn't like him not to check to see if I'd made it okay."

Just after midnight, Stacy called in a panic from Smallwood's Fairburn home. She'd gone there to check on Kelvin and noticed that the front door was open. Smallwood urged Stacy to look around. Stacy narrated her walk through the sprawling, pale yellow farmhouse. She noted that Smallwood's locked bedroom door had been kicked in and the gun that was always stashed in a small pouch near Smallwood's headboard was missing. Stacy was hysterical; Smallwood tried to calm the young woman while dialing for emergency help from another telephone.

Sitting up in her cousin's guest room bed, Smallwood could hear—through Stacy's

phone—the police arrive. Stacy remained on the phone, giving the anxious mother an account of what was happening as officers searched the home that Smallwood had moved into last October to be closer to her son when he started Morehouse College. Nothing—until they scoured the backyard.

"I heard her fall down and the phone dropped to the ground, and I knew something was very wrong," recalls Smallwood, tears welling in her eyes. "One of the officers took the phone and told me, 'Ms. Smallwood, we found your son and he's dead. He's apparently shot himself.'"

In an instant the center of her universe was gone. It was surreal. This couldn't be. Kelvin, or "Mik," as she called him, wouldn't do something like this. Why should he? He was a sophomore English major on a full academic scholarship to one of the most prestigious historically black colleges in the country. He had a 4.0 grade point average. He'd graduated with honors from Bethesda–Chevy Chase High School, where he was captain of the Barons football team and overwhelmingly voted "Mr. B-CC." He was a budding photographer and a scuba diver. He mentored at-risk children in his spare time. He'd already lined up a summer internship through Georgetown University. Kelvin was the son everyone wanted. Kelvin was the son Smallwood *always* wanted.

Most people would assume that Kelvin's story is unfortunate but rare. The reality is that suicide is a serious public health concern in Georgia—the third leading cause of death among fifteen- to thirty-four-year-olds in the state, according to the Centers for Disease Control's National Center for Health Statistics data. More teenagers and young adults die from suicide each year than from cancer, heart disease, AIDS, birth defects, stroke, pneumonia, influenza, and chronic lung disease. In 2005, 924 suicide deaths were reported in Georgia, more than the number of lives (649) lost to murder that same year.

"You always hear about homicides on the news, but most people don't know that for

*Name changed to protect identity



DORIS SMITH (left) says her late son, Mark, inspired her to cofound the National Organization for People of Color Against Suicide (NOPCAS) in 1998, with two other grieving parents seeking to unite suicide survivors of different races. Since 2006 **DIANE PETRO** (above) has coordinated the Georgia Lifekeeper Memory Quilt, which pays tribute, one square at a time, to the lives of suicide victims like her daughter, seventeen-year-old Lisa.

every two homicides, there are three suicides,” explains Sheri McGuinness, president of the Georgia chapter of the Suicide Prevention Action Network, or SPAN-GA. “One of the biggest problems is stigma. A lot of people are ashamed and embarrassed when this happens. We need to get people talking about suicide. It’s an epidemic.”

The state numbers don’t differ much from national statistics. Nationally, suicide is the third most common cause of death among ten- to twenty-four-year-olds. A CDC report released last September highlighted an 8 percent spike in suicide deaths between 2003 and 2004—the largest one-year increase in youth suicide rates in fifteen years. Females ages ten to nineteen and males ages fifteen to nineteen experienced

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THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STORY

WHILE SUICIDE IS SURGING AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE OF COLOR, OLDER WHITE MEN STILL ACCOUNT FOR MOST CASES.

A month before Kelvin died, Harry Payne, too, took his own life. Payne, the popular president of Woodward Academy, jumped to his death from the eighth-floor window of the Courtyard by Marriott hotel in Midtown, just hours after delivering an energetic speech at the prestigious school. Ben Johnson, Woodward’s Board chairman, described the event as “an example of what all you don’t know

about the kind of pain some people live with.”

Like Kelvin, Payne represents a group whose suicide rates remain high. “Middle-aged white males, by far, are still the most likely group to commit suicide,” says Leigh Willis of the CDC. “Part of it has to do with the fact that society sends a message to males that expressing your feelings is a sign of weakness. Because of this, men tend to internalize their

feelings and it comes out in other forms.”

Although youth suicide is a major concern in Georgia, increasing rates among other targeted populations are also cause for alarm. Suicide deaths among the elderly here tend to be slightly higher than the national average. In fact, from 1999 through 2002 persons ages seventy-five to eighty-four had the highest suicide rate of all age groups. —CRT

Suicide Mission

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the sharpest increases during that time.

Nationwide, suicide is the eleventh leading cause of death among all age groups, claiming more lives than both hypertension and liver disease, according to CDC data. But suicide deaths are only part of the problem. More people survive suicide attempts than actually die, and people who attempt to take their own lives are often seriously injured. On average, suicide attempts accounted for nearly 3,000 hospital stays a year in Georgia between 1999 and 2006 and more than 5,700 emergency room visits from 2002 to 2006.

Data from the National Center for Health Statistics show that suicides among young African American males have been increasing since 1980. The numbers have caught the attention of public health experts.

“They’re as likely as their white counterparts to commit suicide,” says Leigh Willis, a former CDC Violence Prevention Fellow whose research focused on black suicides. “That goes directly against the long-standing cultural myth that African Americans don’t take their own lives. The research has shown that African Americans tend not to utilize mental health services, and when they do, they tend to be treated by health-care providers who are not culturally sensitive or aware of the different ways that African Americans tend to display symptoms of depression and other mental illness.”

George Rust, interim director of the Morehouse School of Medicine’s National Center for Primary Care, adds that across all age groups, African Americans experience 59 percent lower rates of suicide death, per 100,000 people, than whites.

“[But] when you look at the difference in the suicide rates among black and white teens, it’s not nearly as great,” he says. “This may mean, from a public health standpoint, that kids are becoming more like each other than they used to be.”

Tucked along a busy tree-lined street in Sandy Springs is The Link, a counseling center where every month a coalition of organizations dedicated to preventing suicides meets. Red bricks bearing the names

of suicide victims line the walkway leading to the front door of The House Next Door, a building beside the main center where children and teens dealing with trauma and loss visit for counseling. In the room where coalition members meet, boxes of tissues are strategically placed on tables between plush chairs arranged in a circle; books with titles like *A Cry for Help* and *When Living Hurts* line the cherry wood bookshelves along the walls.

"When I moved [to Georgia] eighteen years ago, there was nearly nothing going on in this area," says Marti Vogt. "There was almost total ignorance to this topic. Things have gotten so much better, but we still have a long ways to go."

Vogt is chairman of the Suicide Prevention Coalition of Georgia, or SPCGA, whose member organizations lobbied hard in 2005 for a law creating a statewide suicide prevention program, which Governor Sonny Perdue signed into law in 2006. The program includes a full-time state suicide prevention coordinator, Jeannine Vinson, and a part-time epidemiologist.

SPCGA member organizations are now focused on developing community coalitions across the state, particularly in rural areas where mental health treatment is especially scarce, and working with the faith community to support and implement suicide prevention efforts.

"The fact that in 2006 898 suicides were reported in Georgia shows that we must do more to address prevention, raise awareness, and reduce the stigma of suicide," says Vinson.

Compounding the problem are the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Returning veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder are at an increased risk for suicide. This has led the military to place a suicide prevention coordinator in Veterans Affairs medical centers in each state. Since July 2007, Georgia has had suicide prevention coordinators in VA hospitals in Dublin, Augusta, and Atlanta.

A standout among the SPCGA groups is SPAN, a national organization which was founded in 1996 in the basement of Jerry and Elsie Weyrauch's Marietta home in response to the death of their oldest daughter, Terri Ann, a successful doctor who took her own life in 1987 at the age of thirty-four.

The Weyrauchs are considered pioneers in the suicide prevention world, a close-

knit community with its own language. For example, they describe a person as having "completed" suicide as opposed to "committing" it. The latter, they feel, has a negative connotation that alludes to a crime or a sin. A victim's loved one is referred to as a "survivor"; an "attempter" is someone who survived a suicide attempt. The terminology may seem like semantics to outsiders, but the Weyrauchs insist that even such slight vocabulary changes help greatly diminish the stigma of suicide and mental illness.

They admit, however, that like most others grappling with the loss of a loved one due to suicide, they were surprised. Jerry knew very little about the symptoms of depression and mental illness, and although Elsie had been a psychiatric registered nurse, Terri's sense of humor and the "denial factor" misled her. The couple have formally retired from the organization that they cofounded, but their activism shows no sign of waning.

Although proud of the accomplishments made through SPAN and its affiliate chapters, the Weyrauchs continue to push for the creation of a governmental body charged with overseeing and streamlining the efforts of the nation's suicide advocacy groups. They also support a movement that would encourage the federal government to increase suicide research funding from roughly more than \$30 million to \$100 million over the next five years.

"Those of us who have lost a loved one tend to have a fire in the belly to do everything we can to prevent others from going through the pain and anguish that we've experienced and endured," Jerry Weyrauch says. "I expect this fire to remain in us until the day we die."

On this breezy Thursday afternoon, Gina Smallwood is barefoot, dressed in a white scoop-neck knit top and jeans, and perched on the edge of a peach-colored microsuede sofa tucked in a corner of the guest room where Kelvin often slept. A compilation CD—featuring everything from Tupac Shakur's "Dear Mama" to Boyz II Men's "A Song for Mama"—blares through the tiny speakers spread around her farmhouse. The heartfelt lyrics give voice to the dysphoric yearnings bubbling within.

Today is a good day. Yesterday wasn't.

So much so, that she had to reschedule this meeting. Today, however, she is strong enough to remain in the room during the video presentation that was shown at one of three memorial services she coordinated for her son (the first a tearful, standing-room-only service at Morehouse's Sale Hall Chapel, the second held in the front yard of this home; the third, due to massive turnout, had to be moved to his D.C.-area high school's gymnasium).

Tears collect in the corners of her eyes as photos of the milestones from Kelvin's life move across the screen in a video montage, accompanied by Stevie Wonder's "Heaven Is Ten Zillion Light Years Away": Kelvin as a curious-looking, curly-haired infant crawling across the floor in an apple-red romper; Kelvin by the tree on Christmas morning with a shiny Radio Flyer; and one from high school graduation, showing him in a navy suit with his blue graduation gown draped over his left arm, the Afro that usually encircled his head like a fuzzy crown pulled back neatly into a ponytail.

Smallwood speaks of the elaborate dinner party she had been planning for his birthday; the mother of all Mother's Days he had surprised her with last year; the motorcycle that Kelvin's father, her ex-husband, had bought him for his upcoming twentieth birthday. "I was always worried about him buckling up [his seatbelt] or driving cross-country alone, when I should have been worried about how he was feeling," she says, her raspy voice trailing off. "That's what's so sad for me; as much as I was into him, I didn't know what was going on with him. We talked all the time."

Smallwood is well aware of the long road ahead as a "survivor" of suicide. If her loss were a mountain, she says, so far she's barely scaled the base. "Everything is new again after you lose a child," she continues. "The first time you go to the bathroom, it's new. I went to the bathroom the first time after [his death] and I was like, 'My child just shot himself.'"

Now she tries her best to capture Kelvin's vibrant and dynamic life in a shrine that spreads over her dining room. Dozens of sympathy cards line the floor of the sunny room where a portion of his cremated remains are contained in an ornate bamboo box, resting atop his fluffy, white baby blanket, flanked by a Morehouse College headband (the rest of his ashes were

poured inside the coveted Adidas sneakers—black with white stripes—that he'd received from his father, and then buried in Kelvin's D.C.-area grave). Resting among the many mementos that conjure happy memories of her son's life is a Georgia death certificate with the words "suicide" and "contact gunshot wound of the head" in bold black print.

She knows it will be some time before she can smile from within like she used to do effortlessly, but the self-described "accountant, artist, and activist" has vowed to transition her pain into purpose. She is committed to raising suicide awareness across the country, especially now that she knows suicide is the third leading cause of death among black males ages fifteen to twenty-four. Most days this personal pledge—one that she's convinced was ordained by God—is the only reason to wake up each morning. She insists that Kelvin showed no symptoms of depression or mental illness beforehand, but she wants to equip others with critical information that could help them identify symptoms in their loved ones before it's too late.

Within two months of Kelvin's death, she created a D.C.-based college scholarship in his name (each year the two applicants whose essays are closest to Kelvin's "voice" will win); met with Morehouse College President Robert Franklin about getting the school's backing on a national suicide awareness campaign in her son's name; and reached out to the Atlanta representatives of the D.C.-based National Organization for People of Color Against Suicide (NOPCAS) about joining in their efforts. In September, Smallwood and NOPCAS announced the Kelvin Mikhail Suicide Awareness Campaign during Howard University's 2008 football season opening game.

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Seventeen-year-old Lisa had just attended the junior prom at Fayette County High School. Her chestnut-brown locks were swept into a glamorous updo; her black, floor-length, strapless satin gown was accented by tiny teardrop-shaped rhinestone earrings and a matching necklace. Her date had awkwardly helped her place

the corsage, festooned with pink ribbons, on her right wrist. She seemed so happy. Diane Petro and her husband, Pete, couldn't have been more pleased. Their daughter had been battling depression for several years, and she'd been taking medication and seeing a therapist. They were happy to see her look so at peace.

Three days later, Lisa got into an argument with her friend, Leslie*. After they hung up, Leslie's mother called Lisa and berated her for talking to her daughter "like that." Lisa frantically called her mother's mobile phone, pleading for her to come home. Petro immediately left her job near Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, but by the time she reached home, it was too late. Lisa already lay dead in her parents' master bedroom closet. She had shot herself with one of the guns her father kept locked away.

"She used to say, 'Mom, I'm so sad,'" says Petro of her daughter, who aspired to become a pastry chef. "I don't want to say I shrugged it off, but I really didn't know that much about depression . . . I just want to get the word out about depression and

mental illness so that others will know what to look for.”

Two weeks after Lisa’s death, her prom pictures—the ones her parents never even knew she had taken—arrived in the mail. The photo of Lisa flashing her exuberant smile is now one of dozens of other faces featured on one of the two Georgia Lifekeeper Memory Quilts that Petro has worked on since she took over the project in 2006. The quilt, similar to the one in homage to AIDS/HIV victims, is part of a larger national effort aimed at putting a face on the more than 32,000 people who take their lives in this country every year.

Although Lisa’s and Kelvin’s deaths followed highly emotional events—the argument with Leslie’s mom, the fight with Stacy—Dr. David Satcher, a former U.S. Surgeon General under the Clinton administration who now serves as director of Atlanta-based Morehouse School of Medicine’s Center of Excellence on Health Disparities, warns that suicide should never be attributed to any single incident or occurrence.

“The data suggests that 80 to 90 percent of people who commit suicide are

suffering from clinical depression or other undiagnosed mental illness,” says Satcher, who has been on the front lines of suicide awareness initiatives since 1999, when he penned the first-ever Surgeon General’s Report on Mental Health. In the report, he highlighted suicide as “one of the leading preventable causes of death in the United States and worldwide”; that same year, the Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Prevent Suicide introduced a blueprint for addressing suicide prevention through awareness and intervention. Satcher’s report laid the foundation for the first National Strategy for Suicide Prevention, released in 2001.

“We tend to try to look for reasons that this sort of thing happens at a particular time, but invariably this is someone who was dealing with an undiagnosed mental disorder,” Satcher says. “That is why it is so important to educate yourself on the symptoms.”

* * * *

“Let me introduce you to my son, Mark.” The words flow so naturally from Doris Smith’s mouth that you expect a smiling young

man with an outstretched hand to emerge from around a corner of her cozy southwest Atlanta apartment. Instead, however, she points to a cluster of photos, all encased in brushed-gold frames, spread across her oval-shaped oak dining room table. As she points to the pictures of her clean-cut son, whose café au lait skin contrasts dramatically with his thick sable hair, bushy eyebrows, and warm brown eyes, she rattles off the specifics of the photos with the precision and enthusiasm you’d expect from a proud mama.

Mark was twenty-seven when he shot himself on his mother’s birthday, September 30, 1992. He was supposed to pick her up from work and take her to a hair appointment. When he failed to show, she called him. She noticed that he answered in a peculiar voice, but he insisted that he was on the way. She waited a while longer, but ended up walking the few blocks home in a huff. She had planned to take the car and head straight to the appointment. “Something told me to go inside and tell him that I was leaving with the car,” Smith recalls.

Once inside, she called out to Mark, who

appeared at the end of a hallway with blood streaming in thin rows down his face. She thought he'd cut himself, but as she got closer, she knew it was much more serious.

"What did those demons make you do?" Smith asked her son, referring to the gloomy feelings he'd occasionally shared with her.

Once she peeked inside Mark's room, she saw the tiny .25 caliber handgun. Later she found a box of bullets next to the receipt that showed he'd purchased both items that morning. Her only child had just shot himself in the head. The bullet had pierced his skull and bounced off his bedroom wall.

Mark managed to live for three and a half days at Grady Memorial Hospital, long enough to say goodbye to his father. Mark was even alert enough to sign his own release papers on the day he was admitted. After doctors confirmed his brain had swelled, Smith authorized them to remove him from the respirator that had been keeping him alive. Her eyes light up when she mentions that the man who received Mark's donor heart is still alive today.

Smith now realizes Mark had demonstrated many signs that he was suffering

from depression. When he came home to Atlanta in 1987, shortly before he stopped singing with the hit-making S.O.S. Band, the group that he had toured all over the world with, his sleeping habits changed; he stayed up all night and slept all day, and he often complained about being a failure. He gave away many of his prized possessions.

"Suicide is like a glass filled to the brim with water. That water represents life experiences," says Smith, gesturing with her freshly painted scarlet nails. "One more drop and that water spills all over. That's what happens when someone completes a suicide."

Like the Weyrauchs and Smallwood, Smith also has turned her pain into activism. She served five years as national president of SPAN; in 1998 she cofounded NOP-CAS with two other grieving parents in an effort to unite suicide survivors of different races; and in 1995 she founded a scholarship fund in her son's name. That same year she created the first metro Atlanta bereavement support group for African Americans, which still meets on the second Tuesday of every month in southwest Atlanta.

Smith would like to continue talking—

she can speak about Mark for hours—but she's running late for a dinner engagement. As she rushes across the parking lot toward her friend's car, she pivots briefly to voice a request. "Be kind to my son, okay?"

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"Sleeping Buddha" statues and ornate, metal hanging flowerpots are strategically posted near the staircase leading to Smallwood's backyard deck, in the spot where Kelvin's body was found. She has already planted in his honor a miniature peach tree in her capacious front yard; the lush, stone-framed "Buddha garden" tucked away in a sunny corner of the back lawn remains a work in progress. Working on the outdoor memorials is a helpful distraction when her budding advocacy work just isn't enough to keep away the tears that often overcome her without warning.

"All I can say is, God is divine," she says, smiling through her tears. "Some greatness will come out of my son's death. God has put me in the position to educate others, and I am answering the call." ■