

Church interior was refreshed in many ways

From page 1

and they helped paint the walls from the bottom up while she worked from the ceiling down.

"We washed all the statues and the stations of the cross, and even cleaned the crucifix," she added.

While the moving and cleaning took place around them, the small painting crew, under Rietcheck's direction, continued to move forward. The new paint scheme included a pearl gray to brighten up the main portion of the walls that were formerly a light yellow-green hue, and a new, more vibrant blue — what Manhart calls "a Hail Mary blue" — for the archways flanking each side of the church.

THE PARISHIONERS' efforts ultimately resulted in new paint for the interior of the church, sacristy, main and side entrances, and the bathrooms; new LED lights to replace the old standard bulbs throughout the church; three new coats of wax on the church's floors; new switch plates; and a couple of new light fixtures above the altar. Additions to the church's speaker system and new grout between the marble tiles on the wall behind the altar are improvements that will also be made in the near future.

The bulk of the project took about one month with Rietcheck and the volunteers sometimes working 10- or 11-hour days in order to complete the work before wheat harvest demanded their time and attention.

THE PARISH COUNCIL also felt the timing of the project was right as the church will



Courtesy photo

Carol Rietcheck paints the wall behind the tabernacle at St. Agnes Church in Grainfield June 21.

"Most of us aren't professional painters, but we're just all people who wanted to help the church look its best. It was a labor of love from a lot of people."

Janice Manhart
St. Agnes Parish
Council Member

host Bishop Jerry Vincke when he presides at a Mass of Healing there in October.

For her part, Rietcheck said this was one of the larger painting projects she has undertaken, and she was happy with the results.

"I was amazed at how beautiful it was and how just a little paint could change everything so much," she said.

According to Father James Thomas, CMI, pastor of St.

Agnes Parish, that little bit of paint and the efforts of the parishioners who acted on the Church's call to stewardship, will hopefully carry the small parish through the next few decades.

"The parish council was in charge of the renovation, but everyone (involved) had a responsibility," he said. "We had a lot of people help with and donate to the project, and everyone has spoken highly of (the finished project)."

Those donations came in the form of supplies, numerous hours of professional and volunteer labor, and even a woman who volunteered the use of the sinks in her home to wash out the paint brushes and rollers at the end of each day.

"Most of us aren't professional painters," said Manhart, "but we're just all people who wanted to help the church look its best. It was a labor of love from a lot of people. It was just the right thing to do."

SUICIDE PREVENTION AWARENESS MONTH

Suicide rates continue to rise in Kansas, nationally

By Karen Bonar
The Register

While her daughter, Nancy, died nearly six years ago, it took Delores Thomas several years to acknowledge to some of her friends the reason for her daughter's death: suicide.

"I didn't tell people for the longest time," said Thomas, a Manhattan resident and parishioner of Seven Dolores. "Friends were really surprised."

Her daughter, Nancy Jane Wells, was 57 when she died.

Thomas said she knew her daughter struggled with seasonal depression but had no indication it stretched past the normal ebb and flow of seasonal changes.

"She was taking medicine for (seasonal depression), but she never confided in anybody that anything was wrong," said Thomas. "She never talked to anybody about it. She didn't even let her best friends know."

Thomas was in Kansas City with another daughter when she received the call about Nancy's death.

"I went to pieces," Thomas said. "It was amazing I made it (to Hutchinson). I said 10 rosaries on the way. That's all I could think of — just to say one after another."

She said she was concerned Nancy's funeral might not be able to be held at Seven Dolores, because of the suicide.

"The taboo bothered me,"

"She never talked to anybody about (her depression), she didn't even let her best friends know."

Delores Thomas
Manhattan resident

Thomas said, referring to her youth, when Catholics who died from suicide were not permitted a Mass of Christian Burial or to be buried in a Catholic cemetery.

Yet her parish pastor assured Thomas a Catholic funeral and burial were appropriate.

Following Nancy's death, Thomas said she developed a deeper devotion to the rosary.

"I about wore out my rosary," she said. "I always knew that God would be there, and you continue to pray for (your loved ones who have died) ... a lot."

It was after her current pastor, Father Kerry Nimmire, gave her the book "Bruised and Wounded: Struggling to Understand Suicide" by Ronald Rolheiser that she began to find healing and hope.

"I always knew that God would be there for Nancy," Thomas said, "and I continue to pray for all of my children and grandchildren ... a lot."

DURING THE PAST 17

Please see **REVERSING** / Page 7

SUICIDE PREVENTION AWARENESS MONTH

Reversing stigma against mental health is essential

From page 6

years, suicide rates have increased 45 percent in Kansas, which is higher than the national average increase of a 30 percent, according to the Center for Disease Control (CDC).

In rural, northwest Kansas, the increase in the suicide rate is even higher. From 2014-17, the suicide rate in the 20 counties High Plains Mental Health Center (HPMHC) in Hays serves is up 64 percent, said Kaley Conner, the coordinator of prevention, education and outreach.

"It's an alarming number," she said. "The highest suicide rates are in rural, frontier, unfortunately."

Conner added suicide is the second leading cause of death for young people, citing the 2017 CDC statistics.

"Sometimes, it might be an act of extreme emotion," she said of suicide in youth and young adults. "Sometimes if young people are in a difficult emotional place, they can't see beyond the pain they're in, which might be one reason why they're more at risk."

Conner said one area of growth High Plains has seen this year is in working with schools. In 2016, the Jason Platt Youth Suicide Awareness Act was passed in Kansas, which requires one hour of youth suicide awareness and prevention training in order to be licensed to teach.

On Aug. 5, HPMHC provided a suicide prevention program for the Northwest Kansas Educational Service Center in Oakley. The event provided information to about 300 educators from 12 Northwest Kansas counties.

The discussion about sui-



Photo by Karen Bonar / The Register

Manhattan resident Delores Thomas holds a photograph of her daughter, Nancy, who died from suicide in 2013.

"Unfortunately, for a long time, mental illness was a stigmatized topic. People might have been too ashamed to talk about it openly if they or a loved one struggled."

Kaley Conner
High Plains Mental Health Center, Hays

cide, and mental health, is starting to become more mainstream, Conner said.

"Unfortunately, for a long time, mental illness was a stigmatized topic," she said. "People might have been too ashamed to talk about it

openly if they or a loved one struggled.

"I don't think we're where we need to be now, but I feel like as a society we are making progress."

Please see **DEATH** / Page 8

September is Suicide Awareness Prevention Month

During September, The Register will feature stories discussing the multiple facets of suicide. The Sept. 27 issue will discuss struggles in agriculture and for veterans.

Please be sure to read the letter from the editor at the bottom of this page.

Suicide Statistics

Every 12 minutes, a person dies by suicide in the U.S.*



Suicide is the second leading cause of death for people ages 10-24

More than 47,000 people in the U.S. died from suicide in 2017*

On average, there are 129 suicides per day in the U.S.*

Suicide rates increased more than 30 percent in half of states since 1999.*

In 2017, there were an estimated 1.4 million suicide attempts*

Kansas Statistics

From 1999-2016, suicides have increased 45 percent in Kansas.*

In 2016, more than 500 Kansans died by suicide.*

The least populated counties had the highest rates of suicide deaths in Kansas in 2016.*

Resources

- National Suicide Hotline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
- National Suicide Text: HOME to 741-741
- A friend asks app: jasonfoundation.com/

* Center for Disease Control (CDC.gov)
* American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP.org)
* Kansas Health Institute (KHI.org)

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Letter from the editor: Let's begin the discussion about suicide

DEAR READERS,

Suicide.

It's a heavy word and a topic that might surprise you as content in your Catholic newspaper.

The word "suicide" is often spoken in hushed tones after a death and usually carries a stigma. There can often be deep hurt, confusion and betrayal after a loved one dies in this manner ... feelings that can persist and linger for years or decades.

Please know the stories included in this newspaper have been more than a year in the making. I've spent much time reflecting and praying over this topic.

The stories you will read in this newspaper, and in the Sept. 27 edition of The Register, are the result.



Karen Bonar
Register
editor

IN JOURNALISM, OBJECTIVITY is essential in completing professional tasks.

I will admit it freely: I have an agenda.

Suicide is a topic that affects our families, youth and the elderly. From 1999-2016, suicide has increased 45 percent in the state of Kansas.

According to the Center for Disease Control, suicide is the second leading cause of death for youth ages 10-24. More teenagers and young adults die from suicide than

from cancer, heart disease, AIDS, birth defects, stroke, pneumonia, influenza and chronic lung disease combined. According to the Jason Foundation, which is dedicated to the prevention of youth suicide, in the United States, there are an average of more than 3,041 suicide attempts per day by youth in grades 9-12.

Suicide is real. It affects many age ranges, and is also an increasing reality in our rural diocese. According to High Plains Mental Health Center in Hays, the suicide rate in its 20 counties increased 64 percent in a three-year span, which is significantly higher than the national average.

This is why you see this content in your Catholic newspaper. It is not to condone, glorify or even condemn suicide. It is to begin a

conversation. It is to bring a topic from the shadows into the light.

AS THE EDITOR, WRITER and photographer of The Register, I am at many events throughout the diocese. At a youth event, a young adult leader discussed the suicidal thoughts they experienced during high school with the youth present. I was touched by the bravery of the leader and the candid discussion.

Typically, in secular journalism, I would never step in and discuss or comment on an event as it unfolds. However, in that moment, after the leader discussed their journey and struggles, I was compelled to talk with the youth. I sought permission from

Please see **SUICIDE** / Page 10

SUICIDE PREVENTION AWARENESS MONTH

Finding healing through forgiveness after death of a loved one

By Karen Bonar
The Register

BOGUE — When family gathered around the table Aug. 9 to celebrate her youngest son's birthday, Susan Deges said it was obvious someone was missing. Absent was her husband, JJ Deges, who died by suicide on March 11, 2018, when she was almost five months pregnant with the couple's seventh child, Samuel.

THE DUO MET DURING COLLEGE AT FORT Hays State University in Hays, and dated nearly two years before they wed. "JJ was funny. He could make me laugh every single day," Deges said. "He could make me laugh at everything and anything. That was the part I loved." The couple quickly grew their young family.

"We were taking it one day at a time," she said. "We were just thinking, 'We'll do what we have to do, pay the bills, raise a family and see where the world takes us.' "What else is life going to be? It's raising a family, paying the bills, having a home to come home to and being together." Several years into their marriage, JJ began working in sales and drew on the strength of his personality.

"From the very beginning, he loved to be around people," Deges said. "He was the life of the party." Toward the end of his life, Deges said her husband struggled with depression, but it wasn't a glaring issue early on.

"I don't know if he had depression worse than anyone else," she said of the early years of marriage. "You have low days, and you have good days."

JJ LANDED A DREAM JOB, AND DEGES said they were excited about the future. But, the path wasn't as smooth as they hoped it would be.

"He saw all of his dreams blow up and go away," she said when that job ended. "He felt there was no way he could get it back. "He didn't see a future anymore, because everything he had been building for the last 10 years was suddenly gone — besides his family."

The prospect of building a new career

"I knew my husband was suicidal. We had been dealing with it for almost two months."

Susan Deges

and starting from scratch weighed heavily on JJ.

"Depression reared its head and kept getting worse and worse," Deges said. "The difference between when we were first married and now is seven kids.

"It's tough, because he expected a lot from himself. It was hard to live up to those standards."

He began to buckle under the weight of expectations, slowly cutting himself off from friends and extended family.

"When he got really sick at the end, he didn't want to be around anybody," Deges said. "He didn't want to go do anything." As she saw his symptoms worsen, she began searching and praying for assistance.

"Late at night, after I'd put the kids to bed, I'd pray and wonder, 'Is he going to get out of this?'" Deges said.

DISCUSSING MENTAL HEALTH AND depression was not easy for JJ, she said.

"He felt cancer would be easier," Deges said. "When someone is diagnosed with cancer, the community rallies around them. They visit, spend time, raise money, do everything they can to help the person with the cancer and family. But when someone has a mental illness, the community (sometimes) steps back and thinks 'They need time to figure it out.'"

Her preference was to reach out to the community, but JJ was firm about maintaining privacy.

In early 2018, Deges said the struggle worsened.

"I knew my husband was suicidal," Deges said. "We had been dealing with it for almost two months. I was exhausted. I just wanted him to get better. I wanted him to get better so we could move on."

JJ went through the gamut of traditional options: hospitalization, therapy and medication.

"He didn't seem to be getting better,"



Susan Deges, center, is pictured with her seven children in August, near their home in Bogue. Front row (from left) are Julia, Sam and Matt; back row, Paul, Drew, Ben and AJ.

Photos by Karen Bonar

DeGes said. She began researching more deeply the Catholic Church and its teaching about suicide, in an effort to dissuade JJ from his preoccupation with suicide. "I read a lot that the Church's teaching now is mercy," Deges said. "We don't

understand how God judges and how it all works. There never was a doubt in my mind that our God is a merciful God." This contrasted heavily with the notion that existed prior to 1960, where those who died from suicide could not be buried in a Catholic cemetery or was not permitted to

have a Catholic Funeral Mass. "My faith became more important to me," Deges said of the months near the end of her husband's life, when his struggle with suicidal thoughts intensified. "I would walk down the block to the church all the time when JJ was sick to sit in quiet and



The Deges children hold a photo of their father, JJ, who died in 2018 by suicide. "It was hard that JJ wasn't there," Susan Deges said. "Right after Sam was born, I was sad because Sam would never meet his dad."

pray." When her husband died, the family lived in a small, central-Kansas town. Their small house was down the street from the town's Catholic Church. "Even after he died, I would go sit in the church and pray," Deges said. "I pray for him. Every day. We have Masses said for him all the time."

"All of us would rather have JJ here. Every moment is bittersweet."
Susan Deges

LEARNING OF HER HUSBAND'S DEATH ON a cold Monday morning in March of 2018 was not easy.

"I didn't believe that he would have gone through with it," Deges said. "We had six kids, one on the way. We were together. Who cares what happens with career or finances? We're together."

Telling her children — who ranged in age from 13 years to 19 months at the time — wasn't easy.

"I told them Dad had been sick, and told them, 'He took his life yesterday,'" Deges said. "They had been there the last two months and watched him not get out of bed. They were aware Dad hadn't been normal for awhile."

THROUGH THE ENTIRE JOURNEY WITH her husband's struggles and death, Deges said forgiveness has been something she has spent time reflecting on.

"Sometimes (suicide) is (a result) of a mental illness. Sometimes, it is because of an unforgiveness," she said, referencing a commentary she read by a Catholic priest. "Sometimes you can't or won't forgive yourself about something."

"I never felt like JJ was so depressed he would take his own life, but when the priest (in an article) said 'unforgiveness' ... (JJ) couldn't forgive those who he felt had done him wrong, or himself. It built up."

Deges said she has struggled with forgiveness through the process.

Please see MISSING / Page 10

Death of a loved one from suicide leaves family, community at a loss for answers

From page 7

People are realizing mental illness is a real illness, and there's no shame in experiencing those symptoms or reaching out for help if you need it."

COPING AFTER THE DEATH of a loved one by suicide can be difficult. Father Charles Rubey, who is the director of Loving Outreach to Survivors of Suicide (LOSS) in Chicago, founded the program 40 years ago.

"We help people try to learn to live with the fact their loved one took their life," he said. "Previously, you weren't allowed to have a Mass of Christian burial for the deceased, but in the last several decades, the Church has softened their approach."

The support program, which is under the umbrella of services offered by Catholic Charities in Chicago, offers

individual counseling, monthly group meetings, eight-week groups for the newly grieving and a newsletter. Some of the support groups are geared toward specific audiences, such as those who have lost a spouse to suicide.

"Their grief is somewhat different than a parent losing a child or a child losing a parent," Father Rubey said, and added support groups can begin for children as young as two or three years old.

Many parishes and organizations offer support groups for grief, which is a great starting point.

"Suicide is a different kind of death," he said. "It's different than if they had a heart attack or cancer, or car accident. Survivors never know precisely why their loved one died. They have to live with mystery, never really finding out why."

Each group is run by fellow

survivors, who are called "facilitators," and a licensed clinical therapist.

"We have an evening of remembrance, usually in November around All Soul's Day," Father Rubey said. "We have a prayer services, people are able to light a candle in memory of their loved one."

WHILE INDIVIDUAL healing can sometimes be a solitary road after a loved one dies via suicide, Father Rubey said a parish or community can assist a family after their loss.

"A lot of times, people in a parish wonder what was wrong with that family," he said. "They don't ask that question if someone died of cancer, but suicide is different."

"People feel stigmatized when there's a suicide, because of the stigma attached to mental illness."

Father Rubey said a community can play a vital role

for survivors. "Have an understanding and compassion for the survivors," he urged. "The community can reach out, let the survivors know that they are there to support them. It's helpful to remember their loved one on special occasions, especially the first few holidays. To remember them on their birthday and wedding anniversary ... to support the family and let them know you're behind them 100 percent."

NOELLE GARCIA IS A former resident of Dodge City who now works for the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City. She presented throughout the Salina Diocese on topics ranging from women's retreats to a diocesan-wide discussion about *Humanae Vitae*.

Suicide — more specifically suicide attempts — are a topic that has been interwoven throughout her life. "When we were young, we knew our mom was in the hospital," Garcia said. "She was in the hospital for a suicide attempt." She said her mother struggled with clinical depression and bipolar disorder. Her sister also struggles with mental health issues. "She has attempted suicide four or five times," Garcia said of her sister.

During high school, Garcia said she struggled with self-harming behavior such as cutting, as well as suicidal thoughts.

She found a more productive outlet for her feelings — music and poetry.

"When I look at the songs and poems I wrote, they were dark, but it was an outlet for expressing some of those things," Garcia said. She married, and it was after the birth of her first

child she decided to seek counseling to work through some of the struggles from her childhood. "It's been a long journey of going to counseling," she said, and added she worked through the "unbound" process. "You systematically go through childhood memories to present day. It wasn't just talking about the things that happened. I was actually saying 'Jesus, please specifically heal this,' or 'Jesus I forgive this.' You are taking action with God over these things that hurt. That has brought me the most healing of anything."

Mental health discussions can be tricky and sensitive, Garcia said. But a faith community should be a haven. "The church is the first place you should feel safe enough to be able to say, 'I'm struggling,'" she said. "As a youth minister, I knew kids were going through things."

NAVIGATING a mental health CRISIS

WHAT TO DO if you suspect someone is thinking about suicide

START the Conversation by sharing specific signs you've noticed, like:

- You noticed they may have lost interest in activities they used to enjoy
- They've been talking about death or suicide
- They've been talking about wanting to hurt themselves or others
- They've been talking about wanting to die

Then say something like:

- "Are you thinking about suicide?"
- "Do you have a plan? Do you know how you would do it?"
- "When was the last time you thought about suicide?"

If the answer is "Yes" or if you think they might be at risk of suicide, you need to seek help immediately.

- Call a therapist or psychiatrist/physician or other healthcare professional who has been working with the person
- Remove potential means such as weapons and medications to reduce risk
- Call the National Suicide Prevention Line at 1-800-273-8255 or call 911

LISTEN, EXPRESS CONCERN, REASSURE. Focus on being understanding, caring and nonjudgmental, saying something like:

- "You are not alone. I'm here for you."
- "I may not be able to understand exactly how you feel, but I care about you and want to help."
- "I'm concerned about you and I want you to know there is help available to get you through this."
- "You are important to me; we will get through this together."

Please remember, a suicide threat or attempt is a medical emergency requiring professional help as soon as possible.

NAMI National Alliance on Mental Illness

Please see DIRECT / Page 11

SUICIDE PREVENTION AWARENESS MONTH

Missing loved one in big, small moments of life

From page 9

"When it comes to being angry, I was mad at JJ," she admitted. "He's very smart. I'm very smart. We could have figured (our financial and professional struggles) out.

"I was really mad at him for making this decision, but I don't remember being mad at God."

Yet, taking into account the reflection she read about the danger of anger or how unforgiveness can fester, Deges said she knew she had to move past her hurt.

"I knew I had a choice. Either I forgive them, JJ, or I hold it inside," she said, adding that forgiveness of the situation was essential so she could heal. "I felt forgiveness was the way I had to go. I prayed, 'Teach me how to forgive.'"

FOLLOWING JJ'S DEATH, Deges and her children moved from central Kansas to Bogue so she could be near family. The family are parishioners of St. Joseph in Damar, where JJ's funeral was held.

"So many people showed up at his funeral and were touched by his life," Deges said. "I don't want anyone to think suicide is a viable option."

In the past 18 months since her husband's death, Deges said she is straightforward about his death, especially with her children.

"My biggest fear is one of my kids thinking this would be a viable option for them," she said. "Honesty is the best policy. I tell them 'You are at risk for doing what your dad did. I want you to understand it's not an option.'"

Deges said focusing on the eternal aspect of the



Photo by Karen Bonar / The Register
Susan Deges holds a wedding photo. "I don't know if he had depression worse than anyone else," she said of the early years of marriage. "You have low days, and you have good days."

soul is something she emphasizes with her children.

"I believe this is all fleeting," she said, looking across the backyard. "Whatever we have here will all go away. Eternity will be there for eternity."

ANOTHER FEAR IS THAT others who are struggling financially will hear JJ's story and feel like suicide will be an end to their struggles.

"I don't want anyone to think (finances are) a reason for suicide," Deges said. "JJ left us with a good inheritance, and we're going to be OK financially, but if I had to choose between financial soundness to growing old with JJ, I would definitely choose getting to grow old with him. All of us would rather have JJ here."

Especially for the big

"I tell (my kids) 'You are at risk for doing what your dad did. I want you to understand it's not an option.'"

Susan Deges

moments, such as the birth of their seventh child, Samuel.

"It was hard that JJ wasn't there," Deges said. "Right after Sam was born, I was sad because Sam would never meet his dad."

She paused and reflected on Samuel's recent first birthday.

"Every moment was bittersweet," Deges said. "We were singing happy birthday to Sam and we were all together, but one person was missing."

12 SUICIDE WARNING SIGNS

- Feeling like a burden
- Being isolated
- Increased anxiety
- Feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Increased substance use
- Looking for a way to access lethal means
- Increased anger or rage
- Extreme mood swings
- Expressing hopelessness
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Talking or posting about wanting to die
- Making plans for suicide

5 STEPS TO HELP SOMEONE AT RISK

- Ask.
- Keep them safe.
- Be there.
- Help them connect.
- Follow up.

Source: CDC.gov



SUICIDE PREVENTION AWARENESS MONTH

Direct, candid conversation about suicide is often helpful

From page 9

Every message teens get (from society) divorces body and soul. If the body is a prison, and mental health imprisons them, they can think suicide will set them free.

But because the body and soul are intertwined, they cannot be divided.

"I am trying to get teens to understand the answer to the question, 'Where is God in my suffering?' or, 'How can I ask God to alleviate my suffering?' It's easy to feel abandoned when we're suffering," Garcia said. "Those are the pillars the '13 Reasons Why You Matter' talk is founded upon."

She recently partnered with her husband, David McHugh, on a song, "Between the Bridge and the River," that addresses God's mercy.

Discussing mental health and suicide can be a delicate conversation, one that many are afraid or uncomfortable to have. Garcia hopes using music and art in the music video for the song, will help bring healing, but also awareness.

"Talking about suicide opens up the doors for somebody who is struggling to be able to share without feeling like you will judge them," Garcia said.

THERE IS A preconceived notion that discussing suicide will give teens the idea, and they will act upon it.

"If you ask, and someone is not suicidal, they will not become suicidal as a result

of that question," Conner said. "We do know asking that question and having a direct conversation can save a life. Sometimes people are struggling, and they might be waiting for someone to notice and ask the question."

Mental health struggles often come with a stigma, she said, and people can be reluctant to be open about them.

"I think there is a misconception that admitting you're struggling is a sign of weakness," Conner said. "I think it takes a great deal of strength to be able to be honest with yourself and others around you. To say, 'I'm struggling, and I do need help,' I think that's a brave thing to say."

WHEN A FRIEND OR loved one is struggling with suicide, it can be difficult to know the best way to help.

"If someone tells you're struggling or they're hurting themselves or thinking about suicide, it's always best to take them seriously," Conner said. "You don't ever want to dismiss it and think, 'They're just seeking attention.' Listening without judgement is a powerful thing we can do to help our neighbors."

Conner said a helpful tool for everyone is a Mental Health First Aid class, which is an international training program offered by most community mental health centers in Kansas.

"It provides guidance and practical tools for knowing how to approach someone you're concerned about,

how to ask the right questions and where to go from there," she said.

GARCIA SAID EVERY family differs in their comfort level in discussing a loved one who struggles with suicidal thoughts.

"To some families, it's hard to talk about, others are very open," she said. "It just depends on the family."

"I think the best thing we can do is pray and fast for them as much as possible. Also check in and say, 'We just want to see how you're doing.'"

Susan Deges, whose husband died from suicide about 18 months ago, said that after her husband's death, she was looking through his phone and saw many friends who reached out to JJ.

"He had cut himself off from most people," she said. "People would message him or text him, and he never responded."

"If you think someone is suicidal, reach out to the people closest to them. A lot of times that individual will ignore you, but if they have a wife or kids or mom, reach out to those people and ask candidly, 'What's going on?' and, 'What can I do to help?'"

Deges said in her experience with her husband, he would not take the initiative to reach out for help.

"People who are suicidal have already written themselves off," she said.

ANOTHER STRUGGLE IS geography.

Conner said every county in Kansas is served by a

community mental health center. HPMHC is one of about 20 in Kansas, and has six full-time offices, and 13 outreach locations in the more than 19,000 square miles in the 20 counties they serve.

"High Plains has telemedicine units in all of our county hospitals and county jails," Conner said of HPMHC's coverage area.

"We do our best to have a mental health professional in the moment of crisis."

Conner said there are many avenues for assistance, but it is important to talk to someone.

"Professional help can also look like visiting your primary care physician as a starting point," she said if someone is struggling with mild or seasonal depression. "Others might start by visiting with a trusted clergy member."

In the case of an emergency, Conner said calling 911, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-8255), text the lifeline (text "home" to 741741), or call the High Plains 24/7 crisis hotline ((800) 432-0333) are all viable options.

"In rural Kansas, the resources are not always readily available," Garcia said, "but there are Catholic counselors who will do remote appointments."

She said she heard of Catholic churches who have a mental health professional who volunteers to be available during Reconciliation.

"The Church, because it's a large organization, could tie their expertise into the faith," Garcia said. "We have so many good Catholic mental health professionals.

RESOURCES

- **Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/ 1-800-273-8255
- **High Plains Mental Health Center:** hpmhc.com/ (785) 628-2871
- **Loving Outreach to Suicide Survivors:** www.catholiccharities.net /GetHelp/OurServices/Counseling/Loss.aspx
- **The Jason Foundation:** jasonfoundation.com
- **Mental Health First Aid Class:** www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org

If they were around once a month during confession so a priest can say, "This sounds like a mental health issue or addiction. Can you see the mental health counselor, and they can help get the resources you need."

SUICIDE IS A DIFFICULT topic, but Garcia said it's important to bring Catholic faith into the mix when discussing it.

"We know God heals and gives hope and gives life," she said.

Openly discussing suicide or thinking about loved ones who died in that way is a struggle.

"God knows the depths of that person's thinking," Garcia said. "We have to just trust in God's mercy and have hope in that."

Suicide affects youth, rural populations in Kansas

From page 7

the leaders and faced a group of teens.

In that moment, with tears in my eyes, all I could say was this: "We parents love our children. We love you so much. But that doesn't mean we will love you perfectly or show our love in the best way. We are going to make mistakes every single day and will probably mishandle difficult situations. Even when we act badly, we still love you. Please — please — if and when these struggles arise, go to your parents or trusted adult. Talk to them. If we knew the struggle and depth of your hurt and pain, we would want to help. But we cannot help if we do not know. Please, come to us and talk."

Sadly, like many families, suicide has affected the lives of several in my own extended family. Elderly family members who I never knew died via suicide. A college-aged family member also died from suicide before my parents were married. There are branches missing from my family tree because of suicide. Even though I never knew these family members, it's hard not to wonder or play the "what if" game in my mind.

During high school (20-plus years ago), I struggled with the feelings common to teenagers. I wondered if my life mattered. I felt like things would be better or easier for people if I wasn't around. I felt worthless.

Yet, I was blessed with amazing friends, and we were able to have candid discussions about our

struggles. We had a code word, and when it was spoken, everyone would surround that individual with love, support and affirmation. Had the struggles been more deep-seeded, bringing adults into the conversation would have been essential.

I admit, when I struggled during high school, I thought of the missing branch from my family tree. I thought: "I want to be there and meet the next generation and the one beyond that." The knowledge of the loss and lingering questions did not make suicide an appealing option; rather, it served as a lesson and warning for me.

MY DEAR READERS, THERE ARE some courageous individuals who have bravely shared their stories and struggles in the pages of this

newspaper. I commend and thank them for their trust. Talking about a loved one and their death by suicide is never easy. But in order for us to grow as a community and country, we must be brave. We must have candid conversations.

ONCE AGAIN, PLEASE FORGIVE me if the topic of suicide shocks or upsets you. That is not my intention.

My deepest hope and prayer is that by having honest, candid discussions about struggles — including suicide — that we as a society can move past them.

Thank you for your time and trust. Sincerely, Karen Bonar, Editor newspaper1@salinadiocese.org (785) 827-8746 ext. 21

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