## SUICIDE PREVENTION AWARENESS MONTH

# Cultivating mental health awareness in farming communities

By Karen Bonar The Register

**LLSWORTH** — Both a physician and a farmer, Ron Whitmer knows first-hand the physical nd emotional pressures of agriculture.

The family farm has been in his family since his ancestors homesteaded it on April 18, 1898. Currently, he farms 2,000 acres of wheat, corn and milo with his son, John

"I think like most farmers, any land that's been in the family that long ... I would like to have a legacy and make sure it stays in the family," he said. "When we were growing up, (my four kids) were around the farm, around my father and mother. My mother would take them to the fields and ride the tractors."

He has been in farming through the highs and lows. Lately, there is more low than high.

"Six to eight months ago, we got info from KU Medical Center to be aware because of how difficult things are right now," Whitmer said. The brochure encouraged physicians to be alert to signs of depression and possible suicide among farmers.

THE SALINA DIOCESE, WHICH SPANS 31 counties and nearly 27,000 square miles, is largely rural, with a strong agricultural base.

Charlie Hunt, a senior analyst for the Kansas Health Institute said the number of suicides is increasing nationally.

"(Suicide) rates are highest in more sparely populated areas," he said.

Especially northwest Kansas. "Farming has always been considered an exceptionally stressful profession because there are so many factors the farmer can't control – the market prices, Mother Nature, trade policies," said Kaley Conner, the coordinator of prevention, education

and outreach for High Plains Mental Health Center (HPMHC) in Hays. "These things are all out of their control and make their job more difficult.

HPMHC serves 20 counties, spanning 19,000 square miles. Within those counties, the suicide rate increased 64 percent from 2014-17. According to the Center for Disease control, the national suicide rate increased 33 percent from 1999 to 2017. Also according to the CDC, "the ageadjusted suicide rate for the most rural counties was 1.8 times the rate of the most urban counties."

"We know (farming is) a really stressful occupation to be in right now," Conner said. "We have a lot of efforts coming up targeting agriculture. We're working on some initiatives locally in northwest Kansas to further community education and outreach to the agribusiness community."

**ONE SUCH EFFORT WAS ATTENDING THE** Thriving in Ag Rural Life Conference in Colby, co-sponsored by the Rural Life Commission of the Salina Diocese.

Father Richard Daise, moderator of the Rural Life Commission, grew up on a farm in Kanorado, less than a mile from the Colorado border. He said the current economy reminds him of the struggles farmers had in the 1980s.

"In the '80s, farmers realized they were stressed, but they didn't realize what it was doing to their families," he said.

Yet mental health is a touchy topic for rural residents.

"Most farmers are very independent, and they take pride in that independence," Father Daise said. "There's a feeling of 'I shouldn't need any help.'

With some farmers, there's also a perceived pressure of legacy.

"There's also stress of 'This farm has been in the family for four generations and I'm going to lose it," Father Daise said. He said many are hesitant to seek men-



Farmers harvest wheat in the Salina Diocese.

tal health assistance. "There is a stigma with it, and we need to try to remove that," Father Daise said. "If you have pneumonia, people don't fault you for getting sick like they do with mental health.

WENDELL CALLAHAN IS THE Executive Director of the Catholic Institute for Mental Health Ministry in San Diego. He is the lead author on a chapter in a book with the working title "The Clerical Response to Suicide," which with an anticipated publication date by Ave Maria Press in 2020.

"Depression is the common cold of mental health," he said. "Everyone at some point in their life will have some sort of anxiety, but we don't talk about it as a common health issue. There is often shame associated with mental health."

He said there is a clear biochemical process relating to serotonin that affects mental health and can impact suicidal thoughts.

"I think it's important we educate our clergy and ourselves on what suicide really is," he said. "It's not a moral failing. It's tragic, but there should be no more shame than a death from cancer.

"There's a very clear biochemical

process that mediates suicidal behavior, but we don't talk about it that way. (Historically, the Church has) talked about it as a grave sin."

The Catholic Institute for Mental Health Ministry (CIMHM), which is housed within the School of Leadership and Education Science (SOLES) at the University of San Diego, was founded in June of 2018.

While relatively new, the goal of the CIMHM is to develop, provide and facilitate an effective and responsive network of trained mental health ministry leaders in dioceses and parishes throughout the United States. The mental health ministry leaders and teams will serve as "prayerful companions" for fellow parishioners experiencing mental illness, provide them with referrals, walk with them through the treatment process, and provide parishwide education on the subject of mental illness.

Callahan said the CIMHM is working with five dioceses at this time and has resources online (www.sandiego.edu/ *cimhm*) to provide homily resources, prayer petitions, as well as suggestions for hospitality ministries for any church who is interested.

It's essential for churches to address

# Warrior's Ranch aims to help teens, veterans work through mental health struggles



Jordyn works with Dakota, a grey Appaloosa horse, at the Warrior's Ranch in Chapman Sept. 12. Currently a high school senior, Jordyn attempted suicide during her freshman year of high school.

### By Karen Bonar The Register

**CHAPMAN** — Rhythmically, the song of the crickets rises and falls across the rolling hills. Soft clouds float through the sky as rays from the setting sun dance across yellow butterweed flowers.

Jordyn\* slowly uses a brush along the length Dakota's neck at Warrior's Ranch.

"The horses take your emotions. It's a different type of stress relief," she said. "Instead of yelling or being angry, if I work with a horse

and hang out, it helps me be calm." She tries to visit the War-

rior's Ranch weekly as an opportunity to work through struggles.

"It's hands-on therapy," said Jordyn's mom, Kris\*. "She seems more relaxed afterwards. The animals aren't judging. She can see the progress. She can enjoy the rewards."

WARRIOR'S RANCH was founded to provide outdoor experiences for veterans and teenagers who struggle with suicidal thoughts or have attempted suicide. Has 18-year-old Jordyn

attempted suicide? "Yes," she said simply.

Was it due, in part, to being bullied?

"Yes," Jordyn said. "I took a whole bunch of pills because I was done with everyone, done with all the drama."

Kris said she knew her daughter, who once had a bubbly personality, struggled with depression. She never realized, however, how deep the hurt was.

"It caught me out of the blue," Kris said of her daughter's suicide attempt during her freshman year of high school. "I knew she was upset and I knew kids were bothering her, but she never would tattle or say specifics. I never realized how deep it had gotten to her."

Jordyn said she blocks out most of the memories surrounding the days leading up to her suicide attempt. The attempt led to more intense therapy.

"It was rough. People just were rude," she said. "It was

it was real. You know you had a nightmare, but you blocked it all out."

Returning to school following the attempt was a different kind of struggle.

"People who (previously told me they didn't like me) acted so fake," she said. "When we were in public, they were friendly, but when I friends because she was would text them later, they would ignore me.

"There are a select few friends who have shown their dyn would get teased on the support."

**BULLYING WAS** something Jordyn experienced from a voung age

Kris explained Jordyn was born with the anterior bowing tling. She didn't want to be a of her right tibia, which means one leg was significantly shorter than the other.

"Kids would make fun of her because they didn't know how to process seeing someone different," Kris said. "She would wobble or wouldn't be as fast running, even though she was giving it a 100 percent effort."

At 3 years old, Jordyn had the first surgery to assist in

... like living a nightmare, but lengthening her leg. The journey involved 14 surgeries to stretch eight inches in her bone

> Due to surgeries, Jordyn missed school regularly. She spent 10 days in the hospital for surgery and would have to return to St. Louis for weekly followup appointments.

always at appointments and in pain," Kris said. During grade school, Jor-

playground. "One time, the school secretary called. She watched the things.

tattle tale."

ing sessions.

age," she said.

SAINT

**CHRISTINA THE** 

ASTONISHING

Feast day: July 24

Patroness of the

mentally ill.

SAINT DYMPHNA

Feast day: May 15

Patroness of those who

suffer with mental and

nervous disorders.

VENERABLE

MATT TALBOT

Feast day: June 19

Patron of

Addictions/Alcoholics.



no stigma, he said.

"A lot of folks come to church every Sunday with anxiety and depression, but they're not seeking professional help," Callahan said. "Part of being a welcoming, inclusive parish is having lay ministers with skill set to connect people with services."

At his parish in San Diego, the parish compiled a list of Catholic-friendly therapists for referral.

Some parishes and dioceses are shy about implementing ministry for mental health, Callahan said.

"Establishing the ministry will not facilitate suicide, but that's what people are afraid of. It's an irrational fear," he said. "The reality is people are dying by suicide every day without this ministry. This ministry offers some hope to intervene."

FATHER DAISE SAID A PARISH AND THE local priest can be an additional resource.

"There is an advantage of being Catholic," he said. "You can go to your priest and talk about it in the seal of Confession. You can spill your guts, hopefully get words of consolation, wisdom and forgiveness if it's needed.

"Everybody goes to confession, so they don't know why you're going. Sometimes all you need to do is talk about it."

There are cases where a penitent needs more assistance or guidance than a priest is qualified to give.

"A priest can say, 'This is beyond my realm. Let's try Catholic Charities or mental health facilities," Father Daise said. "Maybe we can set up a neutral ground so it doesn't look like your pickup is parked in front of (a mental health center), so the perception is 'He's in there talking to father about something, it's OK"

Farming is a profession where it's easy to see God's hand.

"When you're farming, you're part of God's creation," Father Daise said. "You

mental health as a public health issue, with don't have to go to a basilica to experience God being present. He's right there in your field."

One aspect of serving in rural parishes throughout the diocese is seeing the faith of farmers.

"A lot of farmers come in toward the evening (to pray) or first hour of the morning to take part in Adoration." Father Daise said. "They bring their problems to God and ask for his help and guidance. They also bring their rejoicing and celebration.

U.S. SEN. JERRY MORAN (R-KAN.) addressed the difficulties Kansas farmers face during an appropriations committee meeting in Washington, D.C. on Sept. 19.

"I think there is a huge pressure building upon farmers and ranchers today, especially involving family agriculture," he said.

He said current farmers see the legacy of two or three generations - a legacy that's been preserved and handed down. Yet with a 50 percent decrease in farm income since 2013, the ability to pass along a family farm to the next generation might not be realistic.

"The pressure to be able to hand off to their children what their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents did for them has to be a significant and tremendous burden," Moran said.

WHITMER, WHO HAS BEEN A DOCTOR for 40 years, said it's tough to see people lose their family farm.

"Those who have lost their farm don't know what to do and feel helpless," he said. "My perspective is that I think some people who have lost their farms are ashamed. They feel like they're worthless, and they feel depressed.

"Some find other jobs, but it's not what they want to do. But they are doing what they need to do to have income for their family."



"She didn't develop a lot of

boys pick on her by throwing rocks," Kris said. "Jordyn's problem was always not tat-

By the time she reached middle school, Kris said it was important to her that Jordyn have regular counsel-

"It was hard to find counselors to take someone that

THROUGHOUT SCHOOL, Jordyn said she struggled with feeling excluded.

"I'm used to it, but it still hurts when I have to try hard to get someone's attention, and I know they're ignoring me because they don't like me," she said. "It hurts

because I'm a people person.' It's not simply being ignored, though.

"I scroll through social media and see they're having a fun time," Jordyn said. "I don't get invited to bonfires. I feel excluded.'

Social media creates a host of other complications, including teens who create fake accounts to say malicious

"I've seen some of the messages teens send other teens," said Jodi Mason, the founder of Warrior's Ranch. "Kids who are 14 or 15 will say, 'You're worthless, everyone wants you to die.' It's something I would never imagine. Who would ever think to say

stuff like that?" Kris agreed social media has emboldened teens, but not in a positive way.

TALKING ABOUT A deeply

Please see COUNSELING / Page 15

# **Ranch offers multiple** outdoor therapy options

By Karen Bonar The Register

**Снарман** — The loss of several loved ones who died by suicide led Jodi Mason to found the Warrior's Ranch, Inc. in 2016. The mission is sim-

ple: to save lives, strengthen relationships and brighten futures using nature as a tool.

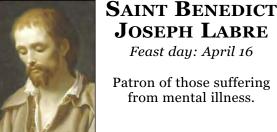
"We are trying to tackle this from two sides: mental heath and creating peer support," said Mason, who grew up attending Immaculate Conception Church in Solomon. "We want to approach from the clinical mental health side and also building a future through transferable skills."



There are many traditional counseling options available, she said. As she researched available options for veterans, she learned that in 2016, 92 percent of veterans said they would participate in some kind of alternative therapies, if they were available.

"With outdoor therapy, it's tactile," Mason said. "They will remember it and it will imprint deeper in their head and on

Please see RANCH / Page 15









**OUR LADY OF** LOURDES

Feast day: Feb. 11

Patroness of healing.

**PRAYER FOR THOSE** 

Source: Catholic Institute of Mental Health Ministry

# WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

Lord, we pray for those who have a mental illness and those who love and care for them.

So often people who have a mental illness are known as their illness. People say that "she is bipolar" or "he is schizophrenic." When we talk about people who have a mental illness, we should not use that phrase. People who have cancer are not cancer; those with diabetes are not diabetes. People with a mental illness are not illness – they are beautiful creations of God.

The way we talk about people and their illnesses affects the people themselves and how we treat the illness. In the case of mental illness there is so much fear, ignorance and hurtful attitudes that the people who suffer from mental illness needlessly suffer further.

Our society does not provide the resources that are needed to adequately understand and treat mental illness. Even with the best medical care available, always taking the cocktail of medicines that are prescribed and doing their best to be healthy and manage this illness – for too many — that is not enough. Someday a cure will be found, but until then, we need to support and be compassionate to those with mental illness, every bit as much as we support those who suffer from cancer, heart disease or any other illness.

All too often our loved ones who had a mental illness died from suicide. They were sweet, wonderful people who loved life, the people around them - and had faith in you. Eternal rest grant unto them O Lord and may perpetual light shine upon them. Amen.

Source: Catholic Institute of Mental Health Ministry





"A life Full of Memories"

**Call Troy or Missy for all your Monument needs** 

Email: leducmemorial@att.net

Website: www.leducmemorialdesign.org

701 Lincoln St. Concordia, KS 66901

### 785-243-4660

# Rachel's Vineyard

healing the wounds of abortion . . . .one weekend at a time



rachelsvineyard@salinadiocese.org at: October 4-6, 2019 ext retre



# **Counseling, consistency are key**

### From page 9

personal and often private experience, such as suicide, in a public platform is something Kris describes as "scary."

"Jordyn wants to tell her story and help others," Kris said. "As a mom, I want to support Jordyn. It's scary because kids are cruel. What if some kid reads it and starts to make fun of her?"

Talking openly and candidly about her struggles and suicide attempt is something Jordyn said was important to her.

"Bullying is going to get bigger and bigger," she said. "It will get to the point where it's the natural thing to do.'

The effects of harsh words and exclusive actions can be crushing, though.

"Not feeling like I'm part of things is what hurts," Jordyn added.

AS A PARENT, WALKING with a child through the aftermath of a suicide

attempt is difficult, Kris said.

"Take it one day at a time," she advised. "Kids get angry at the ones they love the most. You have to step back and remember it may be the illness or depression. Don't take it to heart.

'Still say, 'I love you.' Still try to talk to them, even if they don't want to talk to you."

Jordyn acknowledged it's a difficult situation.

'There is no handbook for parents," she said. "Honestly, every night say, 'I love you,'" she said.

**PROFESSIONAL** counseling and consistency is essential to developing healthy coping strategies.

"If you have to take them (to counseling) every day, do it," Kris said. "They may not like it, but one day they will look back and know you cared enough to take time out of your day to help.

"I hope that more parents reach out to each other. I'm glad to see more

awareness and stories and real happenings coming out, instead of just trying to hide (the topic of suicide)."

From a teen's perspective, Jordyn said she thinks counseling is important, but not necessarily easy.

"Counselors know everything about us, but we know nothing about them," she said. "You want someone who can relate to you on a personal level."

Which is why Kris said she feels like the Warrior's Ranch is so important.

"Working with the horses in nature is more about learning about yourself," she said. "Learning what can you do to help calm your triggers or panic attacks. If Jordyn knows how to calm herself, it is probably beneficial, especially if you can't get in immediately (to see your counselor).

"These animals are helping Jordyn, and she is helping the animals."

\*Last names were not used to protect privacy.

# Ranch is in building phase

### From page 9

their heart than if you're in an office and people are talking with you."

THE IDEA FOR Warrior's Ranch began in 2014, when Mason lost a childhood friend, who was a retired army medic, to suicide. After his death, she began researching available services for veterans and drawing up a strategic plan for the outdoor therapy center. The plan includes equine therapy, horticultural therapy and adventure therapy.

"To me, nature is God's perfect neutral party," she said. "It's not judgmental. It allows you to have the quiet space to heal."

For equine therapy, Mason secured animals who are rescued from slaughter or injured in some way. Vet- culture and local VFW and erans or teens work with the American Legion groups as animal to learn grooming and care. Horticultural therapy is led by a horticultural therapist. Mason said they began this summer with the community garden in Chapman. Veterans will plant two acres of culinary herbs this fall at the ranch. Eventually, Mason said the plan is to have seven acres of the culinary herbs planted. "Our end goal is to have a food business incubator on site," she said. Adventure therapy is aimed at both teens and veterans, and small groups are led by an outdoor therapist. "The idea is that there is the therapy of being out-

side," said Mason, who minored in horticultural therapy at Kansas State University in Manhattan. "We also want to give transferable skills (veterans) can use in the workplace.'

This is important, as those serving in the military transition from following direct commands to having more open-ended responsibility in a traditional job, or if they need advice or skills to start a business of their own.

"We hold workshops on budgeting, building a resume and entrepreneurship classes," Mason said.

MASON AND HER BOARD of directors have partnered with Kansas State University, KSU Research and Extension, Fort Riley, the Kansas Department of Agrithey have planned and developed the ranch. While still in a building phase, there has been much physical progress. About a year ago, an anonymous Catholic donor gifted land on the river near Chapman to the ranch. Plans have been drawn up for a barn and therapy arena for horses. The arena construction will begin shortly. Mason said. Mason said businesses such as Cabela's have donated kayaks and other outdoor equipment for the adventure therapy programs, which include hiking, camping and fishing.

process, Mason said some of the veterans volunteer and assist with clearing hiking trails.

'There's a lot of peer-topeer assistance," she said. 'They talk about things. They need a space they can talk that is neutral, therapeutic and healing.

"Sometimes they will talk about the IEDs in Afghanistan. Other times, they'll suggest to check on a friend. They watch out for each other and know when someone is struggling mentally or emotionally.'

MASON'S BACKGROUND IS in agricultural education and leadership development. She was previously a teacher, and was previously the executive director for the Kansas FFA Foundation. She is currently working on her master's in professional counseling from

# Enhancing Lives & Strengthening Families

## We've cultivated a rich tradition of trust and long-term relationships.

### For decades, we have developed relationships with families 1200 Main St. 6th Fl Hays, KS 67601 just like yours.

11551 Ash St., Suite 205 Leawood, KS 66211

www.werthfinancial.com Phone: 785.628.1712

Werth Wealth Management, LLC is not a registered broker/dealer and is independent of Raymond James Financial Services.

unties offered through Raymond James Financial Services, Inc., member FINRA / SIPC. stment advisory Services offered through Raymond James Financial Services Advisors, Inc

**BECAUSE THE infrastruc**ture is still in the building

Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va.

The unexpected path to founding the Warrior's Ranch has been fulfilling. Seeing teens and veterans regularly work with the horses or take time in nature to decompress and work through stress or anxiety is rewarding.

'The hardest part for me is knowing there is a big need and not being able to fill all of it," Mason said. "It can feel like you're not making a dent. I have to remember that helping one or two or three people is better than helping no one."

For more information, visit warriorsranch.org

**Our Lady of Perpetual Help, pray for us!** 

#### PREVENTION AWARENESS SUICIDE MONTH

# September is Suicide Awareness Prevention Month

Please see the Letter from the Editor in the Sept. 13 edition of The Register for background on this series of stories. These stories are the result of more than a year of prayer and reflection.

This edition of The Register includes stories relating to veteran, farm and youth suicides. The purpose of these stories is not to shock, condone or endorse suicide. Rather, the hope is to bring an open, candid discussion to the often-stigmatized topic of suicide.

To view the Sept. 13 edition of The Register, please visit: salinadiocese.org/the-register/documents

# **Struggling Soldiers:** Discussing the effects of service, stigma of seeking mental health assistance

**By Karen Bonar** The Register

;IGY6 (Pause; I've got your

back).

The tattoo of the phrase is visible on James'\* forearm as he talks about the reality of suicide in veterans

"There's probably not a vet out there that hasn't thought about suicide," he said. "What puts us off is suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem."

James is 48 and lives near Ft. Riley. He retired after 20 years, 1 month and 26 days of service in the Army. During that time, he was deployed five times in the Middle East.

Throughout two decades of military service, James assumed greater responsibility with each deployment. By the time he retired from the Army, he had almost 500 soldiers under his command, had earned a purple heart and three bronze stars.

"I got to know all these guys so personally," he said of those he served with.



James\* has :IGY6 tattooed on his forearm. The tattoo is to raise awareness for those in the military. \*Name was changed to protect privacy.

"They're almost like my kids.

And he was determined to bring every single soldier home from each deployment.

James looks at the ";IGY6" on his arm.

The semicolon means if you're considering committing suicide, pause. IGY means "I got your" and the 6 refers to back. For those in the service, 12 o'clock is in front, and 6 o'clock is behind them, hence ;IGY6 (Pause; I've got your back).

Being able to see what's behind you, see what's coming, is important to those who have served in the military, he said.

'Most combat vets cannot sit in restaurants unless we can see the door," James said. "Most cannot sit in a crowded room unless our back is against a wall."

ACCORDING TO A 2018 report released by the Veterans Affairs (that analyzed data from 2016), an average of 20 veterans a day die by

suicide.

While James has the visible reminder of the tattoo on his body, inevitably, temptation creeps in.

"Sometimes you just have had enough," he said. "You don't feel like you're wanted or people understand or that you're respected. They don't agree with what you did in the military."

One night, this thought path led him to a point where he nearly completed suicide.

"I sat here one night and

**66** *There's probably* not a vet out there that hasn't thought about suicide. ... Sometimes you just have had enough. You don't feel like you're wanted or people understand or that you're respected.

### James

I had a gun to my head," James said.

His friend, Mark\*, called during that pivotal moment, which allowed him to collect his thoughts. While ending his life was a temptation, the pull of the brotherhood of those he served with was stronger.

"I know who my boys are," James said. "I was fixin' to end it, and I didn't because I knew they are here."

FOR MANY, THE fraternity offered by fellow veterans assists them through the difficult times.

Please see PEER / Page 10

# Priests reflect on struggles of mental health, military

### **By Karen Bonar**

The Register

ORT RILEY On the eastern edge of the Salina Diocese its Fort Riley,

copters with his National Guard unit in both Bosnia and Iraq.

"A lot of times, being in the National Guard was harder because you get back and go back into civilian jobs. It's necessary to have closure after (being in combat)," said Father Blasi, who is currently the pastor at Sacred Heart Parish in Plainville. His family has a history of military service. His father, Frank, served in the Army during the Korean War, and he had seven uncles and one aunt who served in both the Army and Navy. In addition to a personal and family experience of the military, Father Blasi served as an assistant chaplain at the Milwaukee VA Medical Center in Milwaukee, Wis., during his time as a seminarian. "I saw a lot of Vietnam vets who did not have that experience (of closure)," Father Blasi said. "They felt



essential to walking through those struggles.

"I think a religious experience helps (bring hope)," Father Blasi said. "The majority of people who are in despair probably don't have a good religious sup

often not what a returning soldier wants to do.

"Going to a psychiatrist is still frowned upon in the military," Father Blasi said. "They've worked hard in the last 10 years to change that, and they've come a long way, but you're seen to be weak or not fit to be a soldier anymore (if you seek mental health services)."

home to approximately 10,000 soldiers.

According to the April 2018 Issue Brief by the Kansas Health Institute, the risk for suicide is 22 percent higher among veterans, compared to the U.S. civilian adult population.

Father Leo Blasi and Father Curtis Kondik have firsthand experience ministering spiritually to soldiers.

Father Leo Blasi was ordained a priest for the Salina Diocese in 2017. A retired Army veteran, he served in the U.S. Army from 1985 to 2014 - 11 years full-time duty and the remaining 18 in the Army National Guard in both Kansas and Oklahoma.

He flew blackhawk heli-

**Father Leo Blasi** their life had no value and that God could never forgive them (for their actions)."

He spent two years serving the veterans, and his military background and experience were assets during that assignment.

"It was amazing to see how their thoughts changed when we started to talk to them about God," Father Blasi said. "They could find forgiveness if they looked in the right place."

He said finding God in the midst of anguish is

port group.

"I think we're experiencing this more as a culture, because previously as Christian culture, men had support from their local community and church."

The current culture, however, turns inward to self, rather than upward to God, he said.

Returning from a tour of duty can be difficult, and many who return struggle to reintegrate. Father Blasi said he has a loved one who returned from the Middle East with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

"We encouraged him to get the proper help," Father Blasi said. "He got the closure that he needed."

Yet seeking assistance in the mental health realm is

While the military is working to reverse the stigma of mental health assistance, "there's still that perception," Father Blasi said.

"Those who are higher in the chain of command accept the need for mental health assistance, while sometimes lower in the chain of command, there is resistance," he said.

He added it's important to realize there are two types of PTSD.

"The first is from a traumatic brain injury, many from an IED," Father Blasi

Please see MILITARY / Page 10

# SUICIDE PREVENTION AWARENESS MONTH

# Peer support, professional help can be key to recovery

### From page 7

Peter\*, who is 36, served for 15 years in the Army. His service included three deployments to the Middle East.

"You get to a point where it's too much," he said. "Suicide crosses my mind quite a bit, and I'm never going to act on it because I have friends and brothers (from the Army) who have died that way.

"I won't commit suicide because I know the hurt that it leaves behind. I can't do that to others."

Discussing suicide isn't easy.

"It took awhile for me to get to a point where I could talk about it with anybody," Peter said, "because the stigma people see toward it. If you think about it, people see you as weak. That's why a lot of people keep it to themselves."

He and those he served with had several close calls during deployment. Once, his convoy changed order and position due to a broken down vehicle, shifting the normally left-facing gunner to the right.

"During a fire fight, a bullet impacted the dead center of the turret," Peter said. "Had (my friend) been facing that direction, he may have gotten hit in the face."

Following deployment and medical discharge, he struggled with physical and emotional pain. It begins with minor physical pain, which can escalate quickly.

"Sometimes, I can be out with a friend somewhere public, and the pain begins," he said. "The pain takes my focus off of my mind and my thoughts. Then they start to affect me. I get agitated and anxious, so I have to leave."

Peter said he struggled with several years of depression. Slowly, he abandoned activities he once enjoyed, such as fishing. 66 A lot of vets feel like they can't get help. They go in thinking, 'This person can't help me, nobody can help me.'

### Mark

"I was in depression for two to three years," he said. He would isolate himself

and play Xbox, but it was a mindless activity to pass the time.

"I was in the basement with the lights off," Peter said. "I had bad insomnia. A lot of times I'd go three or four days and not sleeping, then sleep three or four hours.

"My wife was trying to help. She was trying to get me to do everything she could."

Connecting with loved ones upon returning home is a struggle.

"The connection you felt before deployment is nonexistent when you come back to everybody who stayed behind," Peter said. "I could meet up with any of the guys I deployed with, and we could talk about anything and everything. With family and friends, I don't feel that kind of connection with anyone."

As Peter is climbing out of the darkness of his depression, he is easing back into life. While unable to work a traditional job due to his neck and back pain, he is drawing on his previous construction experience to work on small woodworking projects.

"I'm doing wooden flags," he said. "I can do it at my own pace. When my back or neck starts to aggravate, I can go inside and sit down.

"Woodworking is helping. I felt like I was in a deep, dark black hole. Woodworking gave me a sliver of light I could help pull myself out of. I'm trying to hold onto the little light I've found."

**THE MILITARY SERVICE** experience — from combat to coming home — is individual.

"Everybody will react differently," James said. "We have different context. That's why the VA has the biggest problem, because we're not all the same."

"We could have seen the same stuff for multiple deployments and been affected completely differently," Peter added.

The brotherhood of military veterans are a lifeline and support. Talking about and through the struggles is essential.

"We all see a counselor," James said. "It's easier to go to a fellow vet and say, 'I'm having a problem.' It's harder to go to a person who hasn't been through what we've been through."

Although he said some counselors through the VA are also veterans, which helps increase credibility and trust with veterans.

"The first time I walked in, I was asking her questions," he said of his therapist. "I want to talk to someone who knows about me. When I felt like she understood me, I opened up.

"When I went in to my PTSD counselor, I went in and there were three bottles of water and a box of tissues. When I left, there was no water and no tissues."

Yet the process to seeking a counselor was a slow one.

"I was retired for three or four years, and every time I went camping with a friend, my friend would prod me," James said. "Sometimes, it takes somebody else to see (the need for therapy). Because it was normal to me. My friend pushed me to get help."

**THE VETERANS SAID** the military mentality makes it difficult to seek assistance while serving.

"For most vets, if we go to get help, it's a sign of weakness," James said. "That's why most vets don't get help."

Acceptance of mental health services are slowly improving.

"There are so many avenues to go to now," he said. "The biggest thing with VA is there are so many veterans, they can't keep up."

James said the ability for veterans to seek services outside of the VA system has helped open more opportunities.

Peter said his biggest struggle with counseling is finding a good fit.

"I've been through a dozen or so counselors," he said. "If you don't feel a connection, you don't feel like you'll get anything out of it."

MARK, WHO CALLED James on the night he nearly committed suicide, spent 15 years in the military in security and as a sniper.

"I lost count," of how many time he's been deployed, he said. "Seven, eight, nine, 12? I don't know."

"A lot of vets feel like they can't get help," he said. "They go in thinking, 'This person can't help me, nobody can help me.""

During one of his tours in Iraq, his commander ordered him to go to counseling.

"I was having lots of issues," he said. "It was either go (to counseling) with an open mind - do what they tell you to do it and exactly how they tell you - or go home.

"I was kinda closed minded for awhile, but she helped me face my fears. It was the hardest three months of my life, but I wanted help because I got tired of what was going on."

Another struggle with seeking mental health while on active status is job security. "Sometimes the minute

## VETERANS RESOURCES

**Veterans Crisis line:** 1-800-273-8255 press 1

**Online chat:** VeteransCrisisLine.net/ Chat

Text line: 838255

you get help for mental health, your career is done," said Mark.

**FINDING NOT ONLY** counseling assistance, but camaraderie is essential, the men said.

"What helps most of us is the brotherhood — fellow vets," James said. "I'll sit down and talk with fellow vets."

"That bond (of brotherhood) doesn't go away with time," Peter added.

He also acknowledged support groups online have helped.

"I'm in a group there are thousands in the group who are vets and supporters," he said. "Whenever I'm having issues that are really getting to me, if I write a post, there is someone who has gone through something I'm going through. Within a few minutes, there can be several hundred responses."

While Mark said formal counseling has been helpful, it's equally important to have informal outlets and opportunities.

"It can be just sitting in the shop talking," he said. "My comfort place is in

my shop," James added.

Beyond fellow veterans, James said it's helpful when friends and civilians let veterans talk openly about their experiences.

"Even if you don't understand (what they've been through), just talk to them," James said. "Lend an ear. Let them get everything out."

\* Names were changed to protect privacy

### Military is making afforts to assist with struggla

# Military is making efforts to assist with struggies

### From page 7

said. "The second type of PTSD is from being in a combat environment (witnessing combat-related incidents). It's just as dangerous as the other kind."

He said the military is working hard to help those with physical brain injuries, yet the second type of PTSD is less visible. The soldier looks physically unharmed, yet can suffer severe mental trauma.

"The only way to help people with cultural traumatic stress is being able to welcome them back into the culture," Father Blasi said. "I don't think the military has a good grip on that at this time."

A PRIEST FOR THE CATHOLIC Diocese of Cleveland since 2000, Father Kondik has been a military chaplain for about eight years. The last two years has been at Fort Riley, near the eastern edge of the Salina Diocese. He is the Chaplain for the 97th Military Police Battalion and the Senior pastor for the Catholic community at Ft. Riley.

"Suicide prevention is one of the strong efforts throughout all of the branches of the military ... trying to help soldier be resilient and bounce back from difficulties," he said. "The struggle (with suicide/depression) is a combination of many things. You can't say people who have been deployed or are more frequently deployed are more at risk. Each individual is different. Some suffer from a lack of hope and disconnect from significant relationships. There are several dif-



**Father Curtis Kondik** ferent factors that come together to create a highly stressed personal environment." He has served overseas in two tours — one in Iraq and one in Afghanistan. Currently, he works with the Military Police (MP) at Fort Riley, where more than 10,000 soldiers are stationed.

Addressing struggles, especially mental health, can be tricky. Some soldiers will directly reach out to their chaplain; others will be referred by a superior. Additionally, he said, soldiers look out for one another.

"Soldiers are encouraged to reach out to each other and be aware of signs of stress," Father Kondik said, adding this is often referred to as a "battle buddy." "All the soldiers were trained to be responsible for each other. As soldiers, it's our philosophy to watch out for each other, their well being and have each other's back regardless of rank."