Julie Totten, MBA ‘99 and Marc Bellanger, MBA ‘03
How two alumni overcame their grief to help break the silence surrounding suicide.

By John Crawford

Photography by Jason Grow
Something was wrong.

Marc Bellanger, MBA ‘03, could tell by the tone of his brother’s message. “Call me right away,” Denis had said on the voice mail.

Bellanger, an MBA student at the time, returned the call right after a management class and still remembers everything about that conversation. The date was March 13, and he stood in Olin Hall’s foyer. Snow fell outside. “We lost dad,” Denis told Bellanger, who suddenly felt distant, as if outside his body, as if the call was happening to someone else. “I felt like I was watching myself,” he says.

Bellanger’s 62-year-old father, Alain, had taken his life. Bellanger was shaken, but as he struggled with grief, confusion, and anger in the months ahead, he began to wonder if something positive could come from the tragedy. “People handle grief in different ways,” he says. “I’m not a person who is prone to inaction.”

Neither is Julie Totten, MBA ‘99. In 1990, she lost her 26-year-old brother, Mark, to suicide. In the dark days afterward, she feared she might lose her father, who suffered from bouts of depression, to the same fate. Totten found herself alone and scared, full of sadness for her brother and worry about her dad. “It was very difficult,” she says. “I felt helpless.”

Fortunately, Totten was able to help her father find treatment, and like Bellanger, she began to wonder about positives, about turning tragedy into something good. “I’ll never get my brother Mark back, but I knew I could help someone else,” Totten says.

Today, Totten and Bellanger are involved with different suicide-prevention organizations. When not working as senior vice president of The Kessler Group, a Boston-based marketing and consulting company, Bellanger is on the board of directors of Samaritans Inc. He’s also its former board co-chair. The Boston organization, loosely affiliated with other Samaritans groups around the world, offers educational outreach, grief support services, and a 24-hour crisis hotline that receives more than 100,000 calls a year. “[Callers] need someone to talk to and hear them,” Bellanger says. “We get them to see hope.”

Totten is the founder and president of Families for Depression Awareness, which provides education, support, and advocacy for families dealing with depression. Every year, the Waltham, Mass., group reaches an estimated 40 million people through its website, training seminars, speakers, media appearances, guides, and screening tools. “I think it is important to reach as many people as we can,” Totten says. “The need for this is overwhelming.”

Indeed, a suicide happens every 18 minutes in the U.S., and among those aged 14 to 24, it is the third leading cause of death. The work of Totten and Bellanger is critical to saving lives, especially considering the stigma and silence that surround suicide and the mental illnesses that cause it. Many people don’t want to talk about the issue, even if someone they love might be helped.

Totten and Bellanger know this all too well.

Breaking the Silence

To understand the quiet that envelopes suicide, one only needs to look at Totten and Bellanger’s personal experiences.

Bellanger didn’t know the extent of his dad’s depression. On the surface, everything was fine. Bellanger’s father owned a hotel in Wildwood, N.J., and he was well-known and well-liked in the seaside town. “He wasn’t the kind of person who would talk about these things,” Bellanger says. “We knew he was depressed, but he was an outgoing and fun-loving guy.”

Such secrecy also filled Totten’s house growing up. As a child, she learned to take care of herself. She cooked and did laundry because her father, a single parent, suffered from depression and couldn’t always help her. “I never knew why he acted that way,” she says. Her brother’s depression also went undiagnosed. Totten describes Mark as a “gentle soul,” a smart student who scored in the high 700s in the SAT math section but whose depression prevented him from working a regular job as he grew older.

After her brother killed himself, Totten felt isolated and uninformed. “I never heard of any families who had someone take their lives,” she says. Then Totten started researching depression and realized that her father needed help, but encouraging him to
seek it was difficult. "My dad always said psychiatrists were crazy," she says. Ending this stigma is the hope of both Totten and Bellanger, though when starting to work in suicide prevention, they wondered what they would discover.

Taking Action
The first Samaritans’ event Bellanger attended was a 5K charity race. He was searching for a way to be involved with suicide prevention, but he didn’t know what to expect from the 5K and the many participants running in memory of loved ones. Would it be a sad and dreary event full of tears and long faces?

Thankfully, runners came to celebrate a life, not dwell on how someone died. “It was about remembering people’s lives in a positive way,” says Bellanger, a Westwood, Mass., resident. “It was about turning grief into hope and action.” Buoyed by what he experienced, Bellanger joined the Samaritans board in 2005, where he remains an active fixture. He credits his Babson education with giving him the skills needed to grapple with multifaceted issues and make recommendations that can have a wide-ranging impact. “Thinking through the ripple effects of any decision is important, especially in a small organization like the Samaritans,” he says. “My education helps me to see the broader picture.”

Totten had a background in marketing communications, having worked at universities and high-tech startups, and that helped when she launched Families for Depression Awareness in 2001. It still wasn’t easy. Running a nonprofit organization requires a host of other skills, such as fundraising, recruiting board members, and motivating volunteers. Totten also must be a good public speaker, for the press frequently calls for comment on depression issues.

Totten had one big thing in her favor: a Babson education. “Babson gave me the confidence to do it,” the Newton, Mass., resident says. “Before [Babson], I would have thought it was too hard.” Babson also has assisted her in other ways. Allan Cohen, the Edward A. Madden Distinguished Professor of Global Leadership, serves on the organization’s board of directors and offers advice on strategy, and a Management Consulting Field Experience team provided input on how to upgrade the group’s website.

Beyond the challenges of running a nonprofit, working in suicide prevention presents its own obstacles. Finding volunteers can be hard because many don’t view the issue as a “feel-good cause,” Totten says. Seeking help for those suffering from depression also can be arduous given the health-care system’s limitations, including overworked primary care doctors, insufficient insurance coverage, and an inadequate number of psychiatrists.

Then there’s that wall of silence and the shame that families often feel when talking about suicide. “It’s kept in the closet,” Bellanger says. “A lot of people don’t want to think about it.” Totten and Bellanger, though, want people to realize that depression and bipolar disorder, the two leading causes of suicide, are treatable clinical illnesses. “We’re educating people,” Bellanger says. “You can understand [suicide]. You can talk about it.”

No doubt, talking about mental illness and suicide has power. If some start talking, then others start opening up. Awareness is raised. When Totten began Families for Depression Awareness, she sought people who felt comfortable discussing their experiences publicly. Initially, the organization had trouble finding speakers, but now people seek out the group and bravely talk at schools, churches, and media outlets about their stories.

Of course, to be leaders committed to suicide prevention, Bellanger and Totten must speak about their own stories of loss to others. That can be painful. “The emotion is always there,” Bellanger says. At first, Totten couldn’t talk about her late brother in public. “I used to practice in front of a mirror and cry and cry,” she says. “I had to do it until I didn’t cry.” But when thinking about her brother, the quiet, thoughtful man gone too soon, Totten knows the time is past for tears. The silence around suicide must be lifted. “It’s important to tell the story,” she says.

If you suspect that someone is depressed and potentially suicidal, the first thing to do is listen and show you’re concerned about him or her, say Totten and Bellanger. Then encourage that person to reach out for help. For more information, visit Families for Depression Awareness at familyaware.org and the Samaritans at samaritansofboston.org. The Samaritans’ 24-hour crisis hotline is 877-870-4673.

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