

Depression, isolation, rejection lead many gay youths to attempt suicide

BY STEVE ROTH AUS, January 25, 2009

Attorney Eddy McIntyre worked tirelessly for many South Florida groups and causes, including YES Institute, a nonprofit to prevent young gay people from killing themselves.

What few knew: McIntyre himself suffered for years from depression and tried to commit suicide at least once in the early 2000s. The local gay community was shocked in 2007 when he hanged himself at age 47 inside his Miami Shores garage.

His death illuminates an issue of particular concern to gays and lesbians.

More than 32,000 people kill themselves each year, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which lists suicide as a "major health issue" for gay men. "Gay male adolescents are two to three times more likely than their peers to attempt suicide," the CDC reports on its website.

The issue will be examined 9 p.m. Saturday, when *Prayers for Bobby*, starring Sigourney Weaver, premieres on the Lifetime TV network. Based on a nonfiction book by the late journalist Leroy Aarons, it is about an intolerant mother whose gay teenage son kills himself. It's an everyday story, said Charles Robbins, right, executive director of the Trevor Project, a national gay suicide prevention group.

"We're fielding over 18,000 calls a year from despondent youth," Robbins said. "The average caller is 16 and the four leading issues discussed with counselors: depression, isolation, peer rejection and family rejection."

There's no one thing that leads a gay person to commit suicide, Robbins said, remarking on the "complexity of dealing with sexual orientation."

At least 224 calls to the Trevor Project came from South Florida in 2008.

Switchboard of Miami, Miami-Dade's crisis center, launched a gay suicide hotline in 2005. It became the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Suicide Hotline in 2006. Between July 1, 2007, and June 30, 2008, Switchboard took about 400 calls from people identifying themselves as gay, including 56 that counselors declared "crisis calls," or people at immediate risk.

It's not just young gay people contemplating suicide, said Ed Straub Jr., a Switchboard board member who founded the hotline. "In the first year of our program, . . . 52 percent of the people calling the Switchboard were between the ages 35 and 59," he said.

Both gay men and lesbians are at risk. "Absolutely," Straub said. "In fact, women are twice as likely to consider suicide as men, even though the number of male suicides is higher."

The gay hotline has a \$30,000 annual budget, with funding from groups including Dade Community Foundation and private donors. "We try to spend half or a third of that in advertising," Straub said. "We advertise mostly in the local gay press. That increases the call volume back to Switchboard."

Straub became involved with suicide prevention after three friends killed themselves in 2004. "I'm like a lightning rod. People come to me. I come to the bars. We talk at cocktail parties. On Lincoln Road. People want to open up about it. It's amazing how many people are touched by suicide."

Straub said he has observed three factors that often contribute to gay suicide attempts:

- Financial and health-related issues.
- Drug and alcohol use.
- Loneliness or feeling unable to achieve life goals.

McIntyre experienced financial pressures and self-esteem issues, said Jojo Corvaiá, an artist and photographer who was his partner of five years.

After the two met at a party, Corvaiá phoned McIntyre and left a message. "Two months later, he called me and apologized for the delay," Corvaiá said. "He couldn't call me because he was hospitalized."

"He had a very bad depression episode and he tried to commit suicide. He jumped in a pool after taking some pills," Corvaiá said. A neighbor found McIntyre in the pool and called 911.

McIntyre joined a recovery group. He and Corvaiá became partners.

For the next five years, even as he worked and raised money for a suicide-prevention group, McIntyre suffered bouts of depression that sometimes prevented him from working. Money problems made things worse, especially after he and Corvaiá bought an expensive house in the Keys.

They later sold the Keys house for a substantial profit and paid off their debts. "The depression disappeared," Corvaiá said.

The men planned to have a child together with a surrogate mother.

McIntyre worked steadily, Corvaiá said, but eventually made a lifestyle choice to put in fewer hours at his law firm. The firm cut his pay.

He sank into depression. "To go to work was really difficult," Corvaiá said. "He was feeling more isolated and secluded. He would stay home one day a week, then two days a week, then three days a week." Corvaiá said McIntyre "felt diminished" and asked himself many questions: "What's going on in my life? How can I see myself as an attorney? Will my clients come back to me again? Do I want to be an attorney again?"

Then McIntyre killed himself.

Soon after, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force named its annual Miami Recognition Dinner Humanitarian Award for him.

Cindy Brown, who worked closely with McIntyre at the arts group Miami Light Project, said she felt sadness at his death.

"Sadness for what he must have been going through to have taken that step. And knowing that someone [!] cared about was so tortured and that I had no idea," said Brown, now operations director for Miami Beach Gay Pride.

McIntyre left a suicide note.

"He apologized," Corvaiá said. ``He said how much he loved me, but said he couldn't stand it anymore.'