

# Precious memories

The Lifekeeper Memory Quilts pay tribute to those lost to suicide, writes Faye Michelson.

Sixty-two smiling faces, captured in snapshots of another, happy time—cuddling babies, playing drums, opening a birthday present, laughing at the camera.

The National Lifekeeper Memory Quilt, part of The Salvation Army's suicide prevention and bereavement program, is a powerful reminder that those lost to suicide are so much more than a statistic or a file in a coroner's office. They are real people with real lives who have left behind families and friends who love them.

Envoy Alan Staines OAM, The Salvation Army Suicide Prevention-Bereavement Support Services director, says the quilt is a special way for families and friends to pay tribute to their loved ones lost to suicide. It is a powerful work of art made up of photographs and messages, a moving visual representation of the staggering losses our nation suffers through suicide.

'People know that suicide is a problem, but often cannot fully comprehend how it affects every community in the country. The quilt helps to stop the stigma in regards to suicide; it honours people's lives, not their

deaths,' Alan explains.

'It's a great comfort to the families left behind, knowing their loved one is remembered in this way.'

The Lifekeeper Memory Quilt was launched in 2009 to honour the memory of loved ones and raise suicide awareness by people bereaved by suicide sharing their personal stories and photos. The quilt toured throughout Australia with its message.

'There were 62 faces on the quilt and we got such a response from the community because it showed the tragedy of suicide' Alan says.

'By putting a 'face' on suicide, the quilt helps carry the message that preventing suicide is not just about lowering statistics, but about saving the lives of mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters across our nation.'

This year The Salvation Army's Suicide Prevention Service will create a Lifekeeper Memory quilt for each state and territory, which will be launched at the third Australian Postvention Conference in Sydney, 28-30 June.

Alan invites those bereaved by suicide

to be part of the project, saying the quilts—each of which will honour 24 people—will be shown through the states and territories with the message that the community can and must do more to support the bereaved in the prevention of suicide.

'All that is needed is for families to supply a message about their loved one (up to 25 words) and an image and we'll do the rest—all the designing, stitching and quilt work. Families will be able to see what their panel looks like before the quilt is produced,' he says.

With the World Health Organisation (WHO) ranking suicide among the three leading causes of death among those aged 15-44 years, suicide remains a major issue facing Australia and the world.

For Cindy Mills (on right page), whose daughter Victoria died when she was 17 years old, the faces on the Lifekeeper Memory quilt are a tiny representation of the 2,000 Australians lost to suicide every year.

'As you can see, suicide is an issue that affects real people: people from all walks of life, all socio-economic backgrounds, the rich, >>



Victoria aged two.



Cindy and Victoria on her 13th birthday.



Victoria aged sixteen.



Victoria with her grandparents, sister and mum.



the poor, the young, the elderly—a snapshot of the seven beautiful Australians lost to suicide every single day,' Cindy says.

'To see the visual representation of these amazing lives is overwhelming; to see that my daughter is not alone, she is metaphorically surrounded by other beautiful souls, many of whom are as young as she was, and others not so young. My daughter is not alone, and neither are those left behind, the survivors.'

'Thanks to The Salvation Army, my daughter's memory is no longer overshadowed by the events of her last day and I can celebrate and honour her life in a positive, peaceful and beautiful way.'

Alan says the pain of losing a loved one to suicide is difficult to express and is only made worse by the barriers to public understanding.

'People know that suicide is a problem but still cannot fully comprehend how it affects every community in the country. The public still cannot put a face to suicide, and cannot imagine how many of their friends and neigh-

bors have been touched by such a tragedy. Sometimes words are simply not enough to help them understand,' he says.

'This is an important project for families to honour and pay tribute to loved ones lost to suicide.'

Cindy was part of a support group run by The Salvation Army specifically for those bereaved by suicide. For her it was a place of refuge—free from boundaries, taboo and stigma—to help those left behind to regain strength, purpose and comfort.

'The Bereaved by Suicide support group helped me put the pieces of the puzzle back together and is the single most reason I managed to survive this tragedy myself,' she says.

'Losing someone to suicide can propel one into the loneliest of places, despite being surrounded by well meaning family and friends. I strongly encourage those who have lost a loved one to suicide to honour him or her by joining the Salvos in their new State and Territory Lifekeeper Memory quilt initiative.'

'I was asked to describe in one word what this quilt means to me as a bereaved parent. That word for me is acknowledgement.'

Acknowledgement of those lost to suicide, acknowledgment of the pain and loss that the bereaved have faced since losing their loved ones and acknowledgement that those lost to suicide will forever inspire those who loved them.

'To have Victoria forever immortalised on the quilt has given me an incredible feeling of comfort, closure and hope that in some way Victoria's story and, indeed, mine as a survivor can somehow help others.'

*If you would like to honour a loved one who has died by suicide through participating in a state or territory Lifekeeper Memory Quilt, contact Alan Staines at: alanstaines@optusnet.com.au or 0412 164 575.*

*If you need help, call the Hope Line now on 1300 467 354 or 1300 HOPE LINE.*