

# LIGHT,

continued from Page A1

## PURPLE

Name: Jayson. Age: 13. Method: Gunshot. Relationship: Replacement. My age: 25.

Lessons learned: Before I even knew that suicide was an option, my maternal grandparents disowned my family. My grandmother, who babysat my sister and I since we were born, went out and found another family with a son and daughter to babysit. Jayson became my stand-in. When the family finally reunited, I would end up in the same room as Jayson from time to time. I hated it. I hated him. When I was asked to babysit him once when I was 16, I reluctantly accepted and I hated that even more.

My grandmother died several months before Jayson took a gun out his father's gun cabinet and paired them with bullets he'd gotten from a friend at school. He retreated to his bedroom and left his

body for his younger sister to discover.

Jayson left me with a question: Would I trade all the time I got back with my grandparents for his life? His final lesson was and is decimating: My inability to answer makes me so much weaker than him.

## GREEN

Name: Eric A. Howald. Age: 40. Method: Depends on the day/hour/minute. Relationship: Strained at best, tenuous at worst.

Lessons learned: There was a gag used by almost every cartoon character I ever saw as a child. Some anthropomorphized duck, coyote or cat would end up plugging holes in a dam with its fingers and toes. They tried to keep up, but they inevitably ran out of things to stuff in the holes. Finally, they pull out all their digits, give an apologetic look toward the camera and let the water rush over them, taking with it the burden of caring.

That's how it feels to be suicidal.

Aside from counselors, people's responses to my attempts to talk about how I feel fall into three frustratingly neat categories: judging me, pitying me or trying to talk me down. I will tell you

from experience that none of these is helpful, and all for the same reason: they add to the burden, real or self-imposed, felt by the individual.

It's why I decided to volunteer at American Foundation for Suicide Prevention's Out of the Darkness Walk in Salem, organized by Keizerite Shawn Lott, Saturday, Oct. 8.

I interviewed Shawn about the walk, and her son's suicide, almost a month before it took place. Mostly, we listened to each other as we both tried to talk about this difficult subject. Prior to that night, I was not one who thought of these types of events with any great regard. The frequency with which they happen has dulled their luster. It's good cardio, perhaps, but it's easy to lose the point beyond raising money for seemingly unsolvable problems. But the more I listened, the more I realized Shawn was creating a safe space not only for those who have lost someone to suicide, but for those of us that struggle. I wanted to know what that felt like, I wanted to be part of making it happen. I knew I was going to volunteer before she left the office that night, but I didn't work up the guts to tell her (or my wife) until almost a week later.

I arrived at 7 a.m. on Saturday and, within 20 minutes, I met another volunteer, James Lutz, and we spent the entire morning in close orbit. We set up tents and chairs, marked off the walking path with signs and tried to find other places to insert ourselves for the common good. We shared what brought us there on the most perfect of early autumn mornings.

Prior to the walk, the organizers held an "honor bead" ceremony asking those of us in attendance to hold up the beads we'd collected earlier in the day, each color was given its own moment. One of the first to hold up his hand was a man, Rodrigo, standing just behind me. His strand was gold, signifying the loss of a spouse or partner. In the moment, emotion was overcoming him and I stepped back to put my arm around him. We hugged and introduced ourselves after the ceremony and then he headed out on the walk.

Since James and I had already done most of the walk, I stayed behind and picked up a surprisingly small amount of trash. More than 2,700 people participated. More than \$96,000 was raised to continue research and, I hope, continue the work

of removing the stigma of suicide in our society. But as the end neared, I still felt like I was waiting for some sort of deeper meaning to reveal itself.

I was sitting in the amphitheater area as walkers returned when I started counting kids. Kids who were there with their families taking part in an extraordinarily public way to change the conversation around suicide. Kids who were my age and younger when I first learned what suicide was and not to talk about it. Kids who will grow up knowing it is okay to talk about suicide and mental health, and know they are problems to be faced, not feared. And then I realized my daughter didn't even know where I was when she woke up that morning.

My wife and I changed that with a long talk and a lot of tears when I got home. She's already said she would like to volunteer with me next year.

I wish I could say that this is the end for me, that everything was wrapped up and healed in the course of a long morning, but I've struggled long enough to know that it isn't over. It's not over for all the others who wore green beads during the walk either.

I don't have the words to

make it better for anyone beyond letting them know I understand the struggle, but I do have some advice based in experience:

In my darkest moments – the time when I cracked open Choice's door, the ones when I feel like I can't even love myself enough to want to stay, the ones when the psychological toll seems never-ending, and in the moments of suffocating guilt over the role I could have had in helping a 13-year-old boy find a way to carry on – the thing that's pulled me back from the brink was finding someone who would just listen.

Listen without judgement. Listen without waiting to talk.

Listen without fear.

That's a monumental request to make of even our closest friends, but it can start so simply. Take time to be with them. If they need to, they will talk, then all you have to do is listen.

It sounds trite and obvious, but it can and has saved a life. Including my own.

If you or someone you know is struggling, visit [www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org) for more information. If you are in a crisis, please call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline, 1-800-273-8255 (it's going to be hard, but I've done it).

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## Competition will pit ROTC against local first responders

Chemeketa Community College's Veterans' Services unit and the Chemeketa Foundation will host the ROTC/JROTC Physical Training Championships on Nov. 5.

The event will be located at the Brooks Regional Training Center, 4910 Brooklake Road

N.E. The championships will run from 8 a.m. to noon.

Up to 400 different units will be competing, which will include ROTC, JROTC, police, fire fighting, correctional, emergency services, active duty, reserve, national guard, and Veteran programs. Keizer's

police department and fire district have been invited to the event.

The competition will present challenges such as push-ups, sit-ups, pull-ups, a 300 meter dash, and a two mile run. There will be team divisions as well as individual awards.

## Member spotlight SCORE

For the life of your business—

Every year **SCORE** volunteers help thousands of entrepreneurs start small businesses and achieve new levels of success in their existing businesses. The Keizer Chamber of Commerce is pleased to welcome **SCORE** to our list of new members.

**SCORE** is a national non-profit group of over 11,000 volunteer business professionals in over 300 chapters in every state. In Oregon **SCORE** is mentoring small business owners in eight counties. **SCORE**'s mission is to foster vibrant business communities through individual mentoring, workshops, seminars and other opportunities.

Mal Bellafronto, a **SCORE** Certified Counselor received his BS from the US Naval Academy and his MBA from St. Mary's College. Mr. Bellafronto is familiar with the corporate world, and later as the owner and operator of a restaurant and deli. Mr. Bellafronto is a father of two grown sons and resides in Albany.

In partnership with the Small Business Administration, **SCORE**'s vision is that every person—either already owning or aspiring to own a business—has the support necessary to thrive in that endeavor. As volunteers, all of the services, either in person or on-line are provided free of any charge. There are no expectations and no sales pitches with **SCORE**. They conduct themselves with a strict code of ethics and work to help you prosper.

If you are a small business owner looking for a personal advisor, or a retired business professional wanting to share knowledge and time to help fledgling business, **SCORE** will work for you. Please call Mr. Bellafronto, he will be supportive and glad to help. We at the Keizer Chamber of Commerce are glad to have met him and are pleased to learn more about **SCORE**.

**SCORE (Service Corp of Retired Executives)**  
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**SCORE**

Now taking applications for float entries for the 2016 Keizer Holiday Lights Parade, Saturday, Dec. 10  
Email [info@keizerchamber.com](mailto:info@keizerchamber.com) for a form.  
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