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YOU DO NOT HAVE TO SUFFER ALONE

by Reina Canale

*Fact: Every 16 minutes, someone in the U.S. dies by suicide. "There are an estimated 8-25 attempted suicides for every suicide death."*¹

Although it is 2012, suicide remains a hush-hush topic and a taboo subject of conversation. Every year since I became an attorney in 2008, I have come across the annual substance abuse MCLE class. However, I have yet to come across a single suicide awareness MCLE class. While it is possible that I missed the class offering, I have a feeling that attorneys feel more comfortable listening to an AA presentation than one about suicide. This is a shame. "Suicide is the third leading cause of death among attorneys, after cancer and heart disease. Thus, the rate of death by suicide for lawyers is nearly *six times* the suicide rate for the general population."² While depression can be suffered by many, the coping mechanism used is not always substance abuse. It can be pills, a razor, or a gun.

In these tough economic times, many young lawyers are finding it hard to cope with layoffs, difficulty securing employment, high student loan debt, feelings of not accomplishing the status they set out to achieve, etc. After losing that dream position or being turned down time and time again despite a seemingly perfect job interview, many attorneys are forced to suffer in silence and shame regarding the depression they feel from the trials and tribulations they are experiencing.

On August 7, 2011, I experienced an aura migraine, consisting of a flash of light followed by strobe-light flashes and temporary blindness. Within an hour, I received a phone call with the shocking news that my brother had died. He had always been the ying to my yang. Although we were polar opposites in education level, interests and family life, we were extremely close, spoke frequently and relied on each other. He had always been a happy and charismatic person. At his funeral, no one could believe that he would have taken his own life. Since we were children, my brother's favorite song was Smokey Robinson's "Tracks of My Tears." It was only after reflecting on the song's lyrics – specifically, "Although I might be laughing loud and hearty, deep inside I'm blue" – that I realized for the first time that my brother had suffered in silence for years without any of us knowing.

On June 9 and 10 of this year, my mother and I participated in the Out of the Darkness Overnight Walk in San Francisco. Prior to the event, we were required to raise \$1,000 each to participate. Net proceeds raised benefited the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, funding research, advocacy, survivor support, education, and awareness programs. By June 9, we had raised a total of \$2,830, far exceeding our requirement, through the generous support of family and friends. Together, participants raised more than \$2.3 million and, from dusk to dawn, helped to bring issues of depression, mental illness, and suicide out of the darkness and into the light.

Our walk began at Fort Mason, where a few keynote speakers shared their stories, including Kevin Wang. Mr. Wang told about how his sister, a doctor, had killed herself. "[H]e noted the unnerving trend of physician suicides and how little is known about its cause."³ Therefore, a high level of education does not exempt one from suicide. As we walked, we talked with other families and individuals forever affected by suicide.

My mother and I walked 7.5 miles to a rest stop before hitching a ride back to Fort Mason, whereupon we walked an additional 1.5 miles through seemingly endless luminaria representing those lost through suicide. This was truly an emotional and enriching journey. Thank you to all our family and friends who supported us both emotionally and financially in this truly unforgettable experience.

After participating in this event, it is my hope that I can encourage the RCBA and the State Bar to increase MCLE offerings in suicide prevention and awareness. My brother left behind a widow, four young children, our 94-year-old grandmother, our parents, me, and countless family and friends. In writing this article, it is my hope that another family doesn't have to endure the pain my family continues to go through in coping with his death. If you are in crisis, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at (800) 273-TALK (8255).

Reina Canale is the Executive Director and Staff Attorney for Inland Empire Latino Lawyers Association.

1 Facts About Suicide and Depression, theovernight.donordrive.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=cms.page&id=1034.

2 The Lawyers' Epidemic: Depression, Suicide, and Substance Abuse, abnormaluse.com/2012/03/the-lawyers-epidemic-depression-suicide-and-substance-abuse.html, italics added.

3 Thousands Walk Through San Francisco All Night for Suicide Prevention, sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2012/06/09/1000s-walk-through-san-francisco-all-night-for-suicide-prevention.