



## *The Katie Project*

*“Leave No Child, No Young Adult, No One at Risk”*

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Dear Parents,

I am writing this letter to you first as a parent, and secondly as an advocate for proactive awareness on Teenage Suicide Prevention. As a father of four children, I understand the gamut of emotions a parent runs through as they minister to the needs of a family, and the growing and nurturing of God’s greatest gift, our children. I also know the feeling of emptiness that occurs when you lose one of these gifts, and the unending desperation that one must endure praying and hoping that they did everything they possibly could to save and protect their child.

Suicide, like all tragedies, is never expected. It can’t happen here, not to us, not to our family, not to one of our children. Yet it does, and in alarming numbers, and to family members and friends where you would never anticipate it. As adults, we learn from our experiences, our mistakes, our trials and errors, and from the scars and broken promises along our path of life. Many of us look back and say, I could never go through High School again, or if I did, boy would I do things different.

The truth is; I believe our children have it more difficult in their young adult lives than we ever did. While we live in a world of greater opportunity and abundance, we also live with the growing pains that go with this new landscape. Life has indeed gotten tougher, and even more so, it has gotten faster. Things happen at a greater pace, television is more liberal, movies more realistic, and the internet breeds a whole new communications paradigm that some adults have difficulty navigating. It is not a cliché to say that our children grow up faster, because they do, because we as parents are moving at a faster pace as well.

This change by its own basic nature creates a powerful enemy – *increased peer pressure*. And don’t underestimate this enemy, it is at the front of all of our teens and young adults’ behavior, the need for acceptance, the need to belong, the need to fit in. Balancing with this need to belong is the fear of failure, the isolation that may come with non acceptance, even in areas of our lives that we as parents may deem insignificant. The little things do matter, and we need to understand this.

My daughter Katie was like all other young adults, just like your children. She had the fear that she was not pretty enough, or that she was not thin enough, or tall enough, or had the right clothes, or behaved in a way that brought her acceptance and the rewards of friendship. She obsessed about some things openly at time, and hid many other things deep inside, away most certainly from her parents, and in many occasions, away from her close friends and confidants. She struggled at times to find her identity, to distinguish herself as different among the many students at her high school, to become her own woman, to leave a mark with her independence.



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She outwardly had moments of depression, moments of anger, and moments of fear. She was experiencing the growing pains that your children do, or will, and as we did once ourselves. As divorced parents, we sought to find her counseling and help, and strived to put apart our differences to focus on what really mattered, Katie’s well being.

While we thought we were doing the best thing possible for our child, we were not. This I say based on what I know now, and did not know then. We were responding to what we saw as symptoms, behavior that was deemed unacceptable. We made every decision out of love and caring, but did so based on what we thought would help. What society had told us would help, and what professional, legal and governmental help that was available for our use. There were warning signs we did not see, moments of withdrawal that were taken as independence, bouts of depression that were interpreted as someone needing space. There was anger that was really fear, screaming for attention that was really a cry for help. Most of the professionals we worked with did not see this coming, and some at least acknowledged a potential. No one said it was imminent.

If I could do it all over again, would I do things differently? Yes in some areas. And how do I know that? Because I spend every day of my life rethinking the memories, the actions and the reactions, looking for signs, looking for answers, looking at situations in that I would have reacted differently. If I only knew then what I know now. Death is permanent, I cannot change that. I will never have that chance again, but you do.

You can learn from my experience, you can learn from my daughter’s tragedy. You can look deeply into trusting your child as you have throughout their formative years. Nothing magical occurs when they enter their teens, other than they are growing up, just as we did, only under greater pressures. Communication runs both ways, independence thrives with inter-dependence. You still need each other. You, as a parent, first need to be trustworthy for them to trust you. You should seek first to understand their needs, their fears, before attempting to be understood. You can move proactively to be involved in their lives without being a burden. You can be a partner to their teachers, a mentor to their friends, a resource when they need you. You have time for this – you have no greater priority in your life. Listen to them, give them every opportunity to know that they can always come to you and open up their hearts, they can speak to you without fear of reprisal.

Above all else, Love them, Love them unconditionally, and if you are ever at a loss for words to say, or something else to do for them, Love them more.

Sincerely,

Dick Rothen

Katie’s Father

<http://www.thekatieproject.org/>