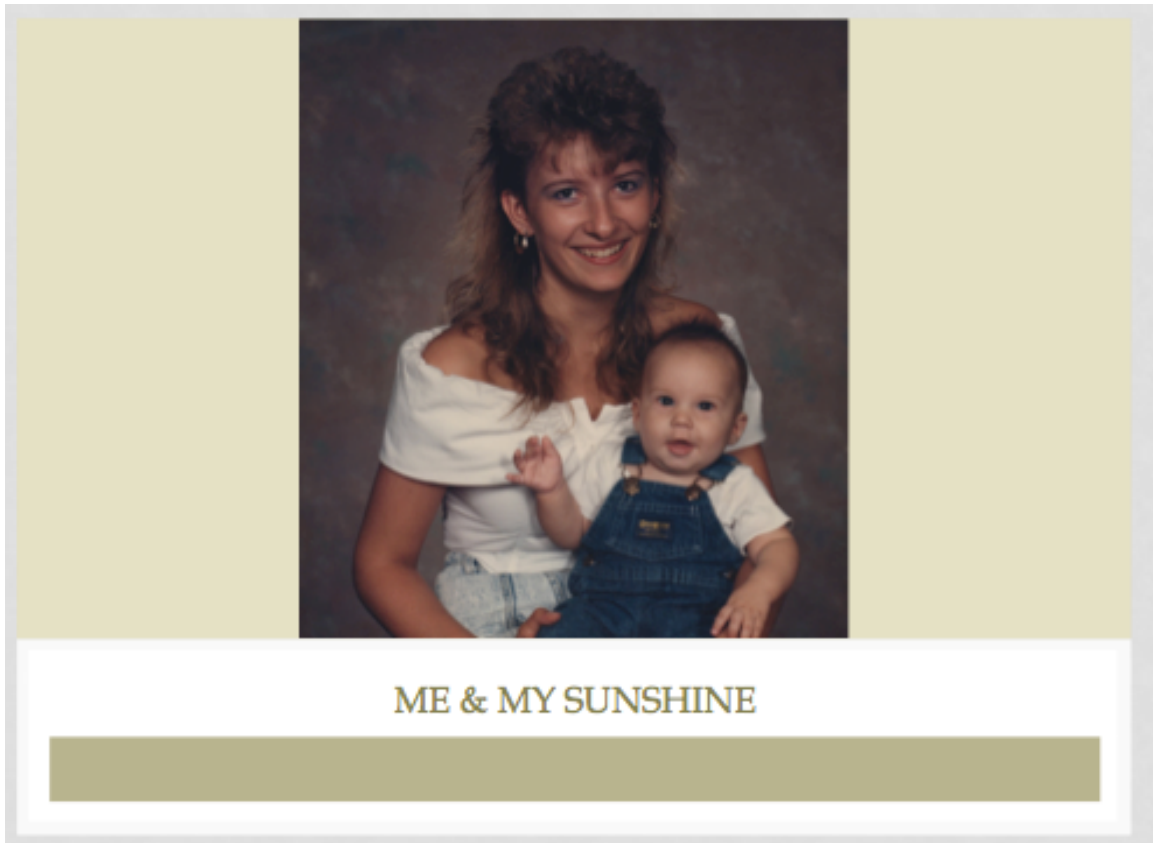




On April 28, 2010 my beautiful oldest son Jonathon committed suicide. He was 22 years old.

I have survived 1348 days without the sunshine of my life. I don't exactly know why I number my calendar. I think it is my way of showing Jonathon that I will spend every day of my life missing and loving him. At the beginning of my grief journey, I didn't know how I could physically live through so much pain. Each new day brought the amazement that although I couldn't breath, couldn't eat and wanted to never get out of bed again, somehow God gave me the strength to keep pushing on so I could try to continue to be the mother my two other children deserved. Those marked days on my calendar are not only the reminder of my never-ending pain; they are also my reminder that somehow, I am still a survivor.



I always knew that I was born to be a mother. It's the only thing I ever wanted to be. When I was an unwed mother at the age of 19. I never felt anything but absolute happiness. I was not only an unwed mother, but a single mother as well. It was Jonathon & me against the world from the very beginning.



ME, CURT & JONATHON ON OUR WEDDING DAY

I proceeded to get married and my husband Curt adopted Jonathon, but the bond Jonathon and I shared was one that never wavered and still continues on to this day.

It is because of Jonathon and this bond that I am with you today. When my sister Terri asked if I would be willing to talk to you all today – I immediately said yes. I'm not going to lie and say I never thought about backing out. I am after all, the girl who would skip class to get out of giving a speech. Speaking in public is not an easy thing for me to do as you all can probably tell, but I do the best I can because I feel the subject matter is important and I want to make sure Jonathon didn't die in vain. It is my hope that through sharing his story, others will live.

Suicide and the underlying mental illness that causes it are not subjects that most people are comfortable talking about. Although in recent years there have been increased conversations, stigma still remains.



JONATHON, ARIANNA & JORDAN

MY THREE BEAUTIFUL CHILDREN

I am not ashamed that Jonathon took his own life. I share this information freely and often. I will always have 3 children. One died by suicide when he was 22. It is my reality and it is what I tell people when they ask me how many children I have. I can tell that sometimes it catches people off guard and they don't know what to say. That's okay. I do my best to make them comfortable by my ease in sharing my story. Many times I also hear their stories about loved ones or themselves who have struggled with mental health issues.

I do not share my story or talk openly about suicide to glorify it. I know there are people and schools who choose not to talk about suicide in fear that it will cause another to follow the same path. Fear that others will idolize the actions of another and think it will be an easy way out. I think these stories need to be told to educate about the price of suicide and the other options available when people feel like suicide is the only way to end the pain.



I MISS THESE GREEN EYES!

I love Jonathon. I am not angry with him. I do not think he took the easy way out. I do not think he was a coward. I do not think he made a permanent solution to solve a temporary problem. Those are some of things people tell you when you lose a loved one to suicide. Plain and simple, Jonathon was sick and his illness over took him. He fought a hard fight and he lost the battle. I do not blame him for this. I believe Jonathon thought he was taking his own life not only to end his own pain, but also to make things easier for those he loved.



Jonathon grew up a healthy, smart, loving boy. He was my sunshine and I sang you are my sunshine often to him and continued calling him Sunshine into adulthood. Imagine the treasure I found after his death when I discovered You are My Sunshine on his IPod. It was the much cooler Ray Charles version, but it was You are My Sunshine nonetheless.

Once Jonathon started college his demeanor started to change. I knew something was wrong. I tried to get him to go get help, but he thought he needed to be strong and pull himself out of whatever he was going through mentally on his own. I couldn't make him get the help I thought he so desperately needed because he was an adult.

We had a few roller coaster years. He tried pulling away from the family. No matter what he did or said to me I had one mantra. "No matter where you go. No matter what you do. I will always love you." It is how I ended my emails and letters to him when he wouldn't talk to me. And I tried to tell him it during every phone conversation so he would understand the depth of my love for him. I never imagined it would also be the words that topped his picture board at his funeral.



11 DAYS BEFORE JONATHON'S DEATH

Jonathon did come home to me for help in the last months of his life. I spent those days loving him, laying with him and talking with him when he couldn't sleep and running my fingers through his thick dark hair. Jonathon was admitted to get mental health care twice. The first time he had come home in the middle of the night after delusions had taken him on a 48-hour road trip to Texas and back. We went to the ER and he was placed on a 72-hour hold at a mental health facility in Annandale. He was diagnosed with caffeine-induced psychosis and released.

We thought we finally had answers and were on the road to recovery, but with the removal of excess caffeine and a healthier living style, the same problems remained and Jonathon moved back home.

We then went to a family doctor. He was prescribed anti psychotic drugs. They left him feeling what he called "not right" and he wanted to quit taking them. We were told that they could take up to 6 weeks to work.



Jonathon did not have 6 weeks. He admitted himself to the hospital because he was having suicidal thoughts. It was during his hospital stay that he was diagnosed with schizophrenia and depression. That diagnosis didn't make me love him any less. It was just a hurdle and I was prepared to love him through it. It wasn't his fault and when he couldn't be strong enough, I told him I would be strong enough for the two of us. He worried about what his illness was doing to his family. One lucky day I got to go up to the hospital and make a surprise visit at lunchtime. I usually only got to go up there nightly. He told me I needed to quit coming up there so much or they'd think I belonged there. I told him I did belong there. Wherever he was is where I was supposed to be. I am so grateful that I spend as much time with Jonathon as I could.



Jonathon killed himself the day he was released from the hospital. We needed to leave and go to confirmation practice for our daughter so I had him contract for his safety. For those of you who don't know, contracting for your safety is giving your word that you are not having suicidal thoughts and that you vow to keep yourself safe. He assured me that if he needed me he would call, as I was only two minutes away. He even made the point of getting the phone so he had it nearby. We told each other I love you and I left. I never knew it would be the last words I heard him say.

When we arrived home and opened the garage door – my life forever changed. There was my beautiful sunshine with a rope around his neck dead. It took me a minute after my husband yelled "Jonathon – NO!" to fully understand what happened as Jonathon was standing at a weird angle as his feet were still on the ground. We called 911 and cut him down. Once rescue squad arrived we were not allowed back in the garage for what seemed an eternity because it was considered a crime scene.

I remember pacing inside the house wanting to burn my damn house down. At one point I tried walking away from my house outside but one of the police officers stopped me. I didn't know what I was doing or what was going on. I kept thinking – what is wrong with me? My child is dead, why am I not crying? I didn't understand the full depth and magnitude of being in shock. Once we were able to enter the garage along with our priest to pray over Jonathon – there was my heart laying in a body bag. Unzipped just enough so his head was not covered. I remember kissing him and running my hands through his hair one last time. Even though the rope was removed, he still looked like he had a rubber band around his neck. I torture myself with the fact that he had some blood coming from his nose and some saliva coming from his mouth and I didn't have the sense to wipe it away. I want to go back and be his mommy and wipe it away. The rest is just a big blur. I don't remember me leaving the garage or them taking him away. Sleeping was out of the question and then at some point in the middle of the night – the tears came loud and hard as my body and mind started to fully understand the reality of my loss.

Sharing these details with you is not easy. I have shared some things with you that even some of my family and closest friends haven't heard, but I feel it's important for you to know that THIS is the reality of suicide. It isn't pretty, it isn't comfortable to talk about or to hear, and it is devastating.

Many people who hear Jonathon's story hear the word schizophrenia and automatically think his situation doesn't apply to the quote unquote typical suicide victim. Those people would be wrong. Schizophrenia didn't kill Jonathon, depression did.

Depression is a nasty illness. It robs people of their energy, their ability to care and sometimes even their life.

Here are some of the symptoms of depression.

- Difficulty concentrating, remembering details, and making decisions
- Fatigue and decreased energy
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, and/or helplessness
- Feelings of hopelessness and/or pessimism
- Insomnia, early--morning wakefulness, or excessive sleeping
- Irritability, restlessness
- Loss of interest in activities or hobbies once pleasurable
- Overeating or appetite loss
- Persistent aches or pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems that do not ease even with treatment
- Persistent sad, anxious, or "empty" feelings
- Thoughts of suicide, suicide attempts



Imagine walking up to this person or any other person with a broken bone and telling them just to deal with it. Tell them that their bone wasn't really broken and that they'll be just fine. Because we can see that something is wrong, we tend to have greater compassion and agree with them that they need to go to the doctor. Just because we can't physically see someone's depression, or bi-polar or other mental illnesses, we tend to think they can get better on their own without a professional's help. We need to realize that mental illness deserves to get treated just like any physical ailment.



How about walking up to this lady and telling her to snap out of it? Tell her that her cancer isn't real and tell her she can be better if she just puts her mind to it. We would never imagine saying such hurtful things because we know cancer can kill if left untreated. Even though we don't know her, we want her to get the help she needs to get better. Cancer does kill. But, so does mental illness. For young people aged 15-24, suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death. We need to make sure people know that getting help for depression or other issues is acceptable and supported.



MY DAD WHO DIED FROM ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

APRIL 14, 1926 – MAY 26, 2007

This picture is one close to my heart. It is of my Dad who died from Alzheimer's Disease in 2007. I dare any one here to say that getting Alzheimer's was his fault. He did not choose to get his disease. He didn't choose to suffer from hallucinations. He did not choose to slowly forget who his family was. I think it's easy for us to be compassionate to elderly with Alzheimer's Disease, because although we can't physically see the illness, we know it's there. Other mental illness sufferers also do not choose to be sick. They do not choose to not have any energy. They do not choose to not want to get out of bed. They do not choose to have their delusions or manic episodes. We need to find our compassion for all, not just the ones that are easy.



JONATHON'S GRADUATION PICTURE

Why does society as a whole think less of someone who can't function properly because they are dealing with depression or mental health issues? Just because we can't physically see some ones pain doesn't mean that it isn't real. There are actual physical imbalances in the brain going on and with the right therapy and/or medications – things can get better.

We can do our part in ending stigma by not being ashamed, by supporting others and knowing the facts.

We don't need to be ashamed to ask for help if we feel our minds aren't healthy. It's not our fault and it can get better. I truly believe that if Jonathon had gotten help when we first noticed changes, he would still be with us today. But, he was an adult and I couldn't make him get the help he needed or rid him of the **unjustified** shame he felt.

If you are a parent and have concerns about your child, fight for them to get the help they need. If they are under 18 – it can be your decision to make, not your child's and if they are over 18 – keep trying. Some days the only thing that brings me comfort is the knowledge that I did everything I could for Jonathon. I never gave up on him.

If you are a friend, don't hesitate to break confidences if you feel your friend needs help. Reach out to an adult to help them.

Needless to say, my children have had a lot to deal with. I automatically put them both in counseling after Jonathon's death and I still go into an automatic panic if I think they are even a little bit sad .

There are warning signs of suicide. I wish I would have known about them 1347 days ago.

PP Suicide warnings

- Always talking or thinking about death
- Clinical depression – deep sadness, loss of interest, trouble sleeping and eating – that gets worse
- Having a “death wish”, tempting fate by taking risks that could lead to death, such as driving fast or running red lights
- Losing interest in things one used to care about
- Making comments about being hopeless, helpless or worthless
- Putting affairs in order, tying up loose ends, changing a will
- Saying things like “it would be better if I wasn’t here” or “I want out”
- Sudden, unexpected switch from being very sad to being very calm or appearing to be happy
- Talking about suicide or killing one’s self
- Visiting or calling people to say goodbye



HAPPIER TIMES!

Looking back, Jonathon did exhibit a few of those warning signs. I'll never forget the day he died, him sitting on the couch laughing at a stupid movie. I thought about saying something to him because I hadn't heard that laugh in a long time but I decided to just let him have his moment of happiness for himself.

I know I let Jonathon down. I believe I could have saved him. He told me he was scared. I told him that I think that's normal – they would have never released him from the hospital if he weren't ready. I told him I was there for him and that we would get through it.

I look back and I want to scream at myself to put him in the car and drive him back to the hospital. Nobody can tell me that it's not my fault. I'm his mom and should have known better. I will always live with the guilt of knowing that I messed up. I don't let it eat me up; I just let it be a part of me. I understand that I don't have the power to see into the future and I know that if I knew what was going to happen of course I would have done things differently. I never thought Jonathon would take his own life. I wish I would have erred on the side of caution. I will NOT make that mistake again.

There is help for depression. These are some of the things that I had printed off for Jonathon to hang on his door the day he admitted himself to the hospital. I read them out loud to him once. I wish he would have had the time to read them on his own every day and get strength from them when he needed it. Although they are personalized towards Jonathon, I believe they are messages that each and every person can take into their own heart.

Jonathon's letters

I am a good person -- my parents, my siblings, my friends, my family, my co-workers, strangers I've met at work, my doctors, my therapists all can't be wrong -- I am good.

I will not be so hard on myself -- I will not expect more from myself than what I expect of others.

I do good things -- I interact lovingly with my family. I give Jordan encouragement when he's trying tricks on his bike, I make Arianna feel good by accepting her friends that are boys, I tell and show my mom that I love her, I talk to my Dad and help him when he needs help. Those are just a few examples of the things that I do that are good. There are many others.

I am a good person.

I may have a mental illness, but that does not define who I am.

I have made positive steps in my recovery every day. I vocalize about my situation. I follow my doctors instructions. I allow myself to accept help. I will learn to be proud of myself for the steps I have taken. Things may not be perfect today, they may never be perfect, but I am doing what needs to be done even though it's hard work and I will be proud of that! Life is a rollercoaster, mine may be more extreme than some, but peaks & valleys, good days & bad days are a part of everyone's life. I will not get down on myself if I am having a bad day. I will instead try to focus and believe that good days are only around the corner.

I am a good person.

My road may be long, but I CAN have a happy life. It will take a lot of work, but I can make it happen. When I have bad days or feel hopeless I will concentrate on the knowledge that I am good, I have made progress and I will believe that things will eventually get better.

I do not need to be perfect.

I am a good person.

5 ways I can help promote positive mental health:

- Eat healthy
- Drink lots of Water
- Kick the bad habits -- stay away from caffeine & alcohol
- De--Stress
- Continue to see my doctor & therapist and stay on my meds

Challenge my negative self--talk:

- Do I have evidence for & against my thinking?
- Are my thoughts factual or just my interpretations?
- Am I jumping to negative conclusions?
- Are there any other ways I could look at this situation?
- If I were being positive, how would I perceive this situation?
- Is there anything good about this situation?
- Will this matter in five years time?
- Is thinking this way helping me to feel good or to achieve my goals?
- What can I do that will help me solve the problem?
- Is there something I can learn from this to help me do better next time?

Always Remember
You are Beautiful
You are Worthy
You are Important
You are Special
You are Unique
You are Wonderful
You are Talented, and
You are Irreplaceable

The thing I want each and every person to know who is battling with depression or other issues – you are worthy and you deserve to get better.

Suicide is not an easy way out. If Jonathon were here now I would beg him to choose life. I would not lie and tell him it would always be easy, but I would assure him that I would be by him every step of the way. If one medicine didn't work, we could find another. There are options – his life wouldn't have had to be painful forever. We just needed time to find the right cure.

If he ever thought him being gone would be better for everyone – he was wrong. He left me broken. I will forever be broken.



God has given me a lot of strength to stay strong and try to make good things happen in Jonathon's memory. We started a run/walk in our hometown of Cold Spring to raise money for mental health research. We want cures and better, faster acting medicines to be found. We also try to spread the word and end stigma about depression and mental health issues so people don't have to be embarrassed to ask for help.

But even doing that, it does not make my life better or end my pain.



ME & MY BABY

My life is worse because Jonathon is gone. I dread every holiday because I am one child short.

I hurt for the pain in Arianna & Jordan's eyes when they accomplish something they wish their big brother was there for.

I can't walk down the rope aisle at Mills Fleet Farm. Every time I see rope, my heart instantly starts beating faster.

I hate Halloween because I am scared of the decorations I will see in people's yards.

I am in constant fear of one or both of my other children dying. I no longer live in a world where your children don't die before you.

I can't watch certain TV shows I used to enjoy because too often people casually use the phrases "shoot my self in the head" or "I could just kill myself". Once I hear it, those shows don't get a second chance with me.

I am constantly having to do rituals in an attempt to keep Jonathon's memory alive. This could be as simple as always having to sleep in an article of Jonathon's clothing or as complex as digging recyclables out of the garbage when my family mistakenly puts them in the wrong container. Jonathon was very environmentally conscience.

I can't parent. I always had to remind Jonathon that I was the parent because before he died, he always wanted me to set better boundaries for his brother and sister. Especially for his sister when it came to boys. I was a pushover back then and I am only worse now. I know I should be doing a better job, but I don't ever want my kids to be sad.

I don't enjoy decorating for Christmas any more. I do only what needs to be done.

I envy the family of his friends as they all get to watch their children continue to grow and accomplish milestones in their lives. I usually end up crying after spending time with his friends.

I hate that a child of Jonathon's will never call me Grandma.

This is just a partial list of my pain.



THE FAMILY WITH "JEDI JONATHON"

His father, sister, brother, friends, godparents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, cousins, family and Godchild each have their own list of how their life is worse because Jonathon is gone. Since I can't deprive my other 2 children of never having another family picture taken a stuffed bear now has to take Jonathon's place. I can't take a family picture without him. I still include his name on our Christmas cards.

I know Jonathon wouldn't have wanted to do this to us. He had no idea of the full extent of how awful it is.

Statistics show that 1 in 4 Americans suffer from some sort of mental illness in a given year. If you fall into this category you need to know that you are not alone. If things aren't good today, I can't guarantee that they will be better tomorrow but they can be better in time. Fight for yourself. Reach out for help. If the person you reach out to doesn't understand or give you the help you need – seek help from someone else. If you can't get the help you need from those close to you there are resources and hotlines with people who understand and want to help. Never give up on yourself. Life is worth living and remind yourself that this too shall pass.

There are resources and help available just a click or phone call away.

www.save.org -- Suicide Awareness Voices of Education

www.afsp.org -- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

1--800--273--TALK – call anytime – someone is available 24/7

320--253--5555 – four county local crisis line

If you are one of the lucky 3 out of 4, be that support. Be the person who tries to understand and doesn't judge. Send cards. Make phone calls. Arrange lunch dates. Just reach out and show you care.

All of us in this room can do our part in ending stigma by knowing and understanding that it is okay to talk openly. There is no shame. We need to focus on hope. Hope that someday everyone will understand and that mental illness and depression should be treated like every other physical illness.

I'm going to leave you today with the video we played at Jonathon's funeral. I can only imagine the pictures and memories we would have continued to make with him had he only lived.

Video can be found on our website www.letthesunshinerun.com or YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ER2TkqyGSw4>