

# Suicide:

## The Ultimate Rejection

By Sherry Squires

**J**oanne Glenn can describe the day her son died vividly enough to make you want to shut your eyes, to shut out the pain she has endured.

Today, 16 years later, she can talk without tears, without trembling.

It was January of 1982, a Wednesday — the day Chris, 17, shot himself in the head while she watched, helpless.

She can remember the shock, the horror. Then, she can remember little of the next few days as the pain and guilt took over.

“A suicide is the most difficult kind of death because the person chooses it,” Glenn says. “It’s the ultimate rejection to the survivors.”

More than 100 Idaho teen-agers took their own lives from 1990-96, the most current years for which statistics are available. They left behind mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters to somehow muddle through the numbness, the endless questions, the shame that so often surrounds a suicide.

Coping with it is a process, Glenn says. A lifelong process.

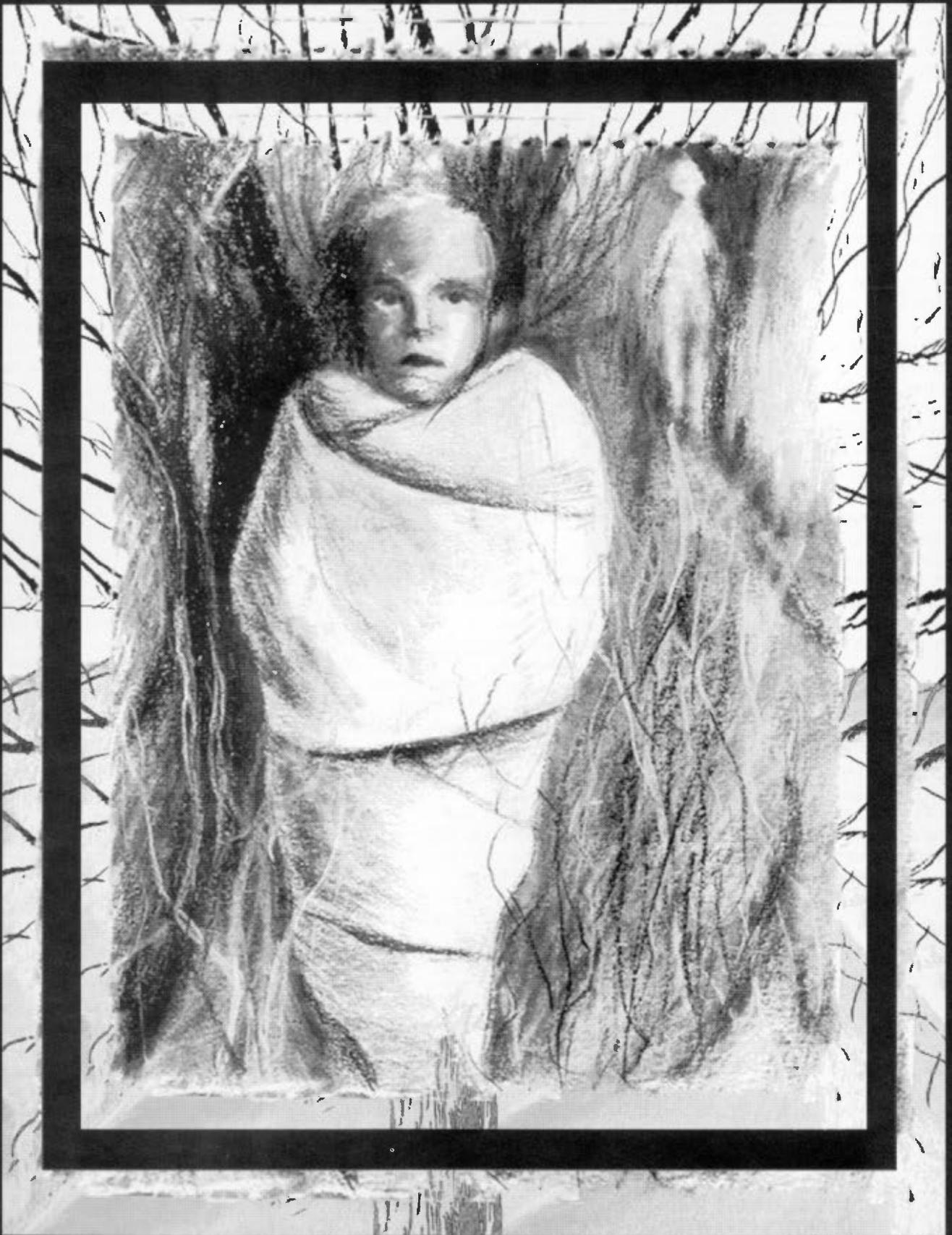
The weeks following Chris’ funeral, Glenn recalls being in total disarray. She would start 15 things and never finish any of them.

She knows only one way to describe her feelings.

“It was like waves of ocean washing over me, every moment of the day I saw the horror of it.

“The unspeakable loss was so on my shoulders,” she says. “I remember scrubbing the floor one day, concentrating only on that, when I just lost control. I could have washed the floor with my tears.”

*‘You ask  
yourself why a  
million times  
until you  
realize there is  
no answer.’*



*Grief fills the room up of my absent child,  
Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,  
Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his word.*

—William Shakespeare

Six months later, the same thing happened while she was driving on the freeway.

"I'm not one to cry easily, but I had no control over it," Glenn says.

After Chris' death, Joanne went to Compassionate Friends, a support group for parents who lose a child. But she soon realized that parents or family members who lose someone to suicide have a flood of very different emotions than those who lose children to accidents or natural causes.

And often, parents are dealing with those emotions alone.

When a suicide happens, brothers and sisters suddenly don't talk to one another. Parents hurt too much to support each other; most marriages don't survive the loss of a child.

Friends they used to count on are no longer around. Family members shy away, maybe because they, too, now feel vulnerable. Or maybe because they don't know what to say. "There's a stigma," Glenn says. "Whether people say it audibly or not, it's clear people believe there had to be something wrong with your parenting."

She started a support group in 1988 for parents or family members dealing with a suicide. "You can go to a counselor, but there's nothing like talking to someone who's been there," she says. "You need both."

Glenn remembers passing through the various stages of grief that psychologists have identified and thinking she was over her son's death. Then, it would hit her again.

Three years after his death, she first became angry with her son for what he had done. But, as always, more than anything, she missed him.

Like an endless reel of film, she replayed his death. She pored over the days before. The weeks before. The years before.

She knows now that she began to notice problems when he was 12, problems in school, a lasting depression. He experimented with drugs and alcohol, and even attempted suicide once.

But like every parent that Joanne has met who has lost a child, she thought these were isolated events. "I kept having this feeling in my chest that wasn't right, but I didn't know



*Joanne Glenn just finished this school scrapbook for her son who died 16 years ago.*

what it was," Glenn says.

On the day Chris died, his dad was at work. Glenn was home babysitting a 1-year-old child for a friend. Chris was in his room, and his 13-year-old sister was playing.

Glenn asked Chris to watch the toddler for a moment while she took some clothes off the line. After she completed her chore, she returned to the house, and Chris returned to his room.

Moments later she passed by his door and found it locked. "I didn't think he locked it to keep me out, so I put a nail through the hole in the doorknob and went in."

Chris sat in the corner of a room on a poof pillow with a gun to his head.

"I said, 'Chris, honey, no.' He pulled the trigger."

Glenn ran from the room and called 911. She couldn't go back in.

Her 13-year-old daughter was in the room before Glenn could stop her. "She will never get over it," Glenn says. Chris died in the hospital seven hours later after a failed brain surgery.

Glenn says it wasn't until she made a conscious decision to recover that the healing process began. "There's so many should-haves and if-onlys," she says. "You have to realize that the person who made that decision is responsible, not you."

"You ask yourself why a million times until you realize there is no answer. Then you can let it go."

Glenn served as the suicide survivors support group facilitator for five years, before putting it in the hands of Rich and Trudy Jackson.

Their story mirrors Glenn's, and that of so many others they have heard in the past nine years.

ability to cope.

"It would be wonderful to skip the pain, but you can't, or you could be on hold or bitter your whole life," Rich says.

Today, they approach life differently. Things that were monumental 10 years ago are trivial now.

"Rich and I are better people today, more tolerant, more compassionate, more patient," Trudy says. "It's really easy to cry. We don't have to be macho anymore."

BSU health sciences professor Con Colby teaches a class on death and dying, and believes that the most valuable tool in the grieving process is being able to listen deeply to yourself. But he's quick to note there's no textbook answer to coping with death.

"I don't know how to teach about death and dying," Colby says. "I know how to offer some different kinds of experiences, some ways people might approach coping. But there's no way around the problem of what you feel."

The Jacksons are carrying that message to their support group and others.

Glenn has spoken to hundreds of people and many schools about suicide prevention.

Just this spring she finished a scrapbook she was compiling for Chris at the time of his death. Its contents had sat in a trunk in her closet for 16 years.

Her husband has never talked about Chris' death. Her 30-year-old daughter, who was home the day Chris died, is just now beginning to deal with it.

Knowing she has helped others through the support group gives Glenn a renewed sense of hope.

"It's the hardest thing any parent will have to go through in their life," she says. "I'll never forget or get over it, but I had to learn to live with it." □

It was 10 years ago this month that their 16-year-old son, Jason, took his own life. His father, an accountant, and stepmother had gone camping for the weekend to escape after a long tax season.

They returned from camping to find him dead from a gunshot wound to the head.

"It's like a bomb going off," Rich says. "You are so devastated and numb that you don't know how to speak."

The Jacksons were able to get into counseling immediately after Jason's death and credit that with their

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