

holding her head high

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SAMANTHA HARRISON



WHEN SAMANTHA HARRISON'S DAD COMMITTED SUICIDE SIX YEARS AGO, HER WORLD SEEMED TO STOP. RATHER THAN GIVING UP ON LIFE, THE 24-YEAR-OLD CHOSE TO REACH OUT TO OTHER YOUNG PEOPLE IN SIMILAR CIRCUMSTANCES. ALONG WITH HER SIBLINGS, SHE HAS SINCE FORMED A SUPPORT GROUP THAT THE COMMUNITY OF MAROOCHYDORE CAN BE DEEPLY PROUD OF, AS CARLA CARUSO REPORTS.

Samantha Harrison has one request for the profile story about the Maroochydore group she helped set up. She doesn't want the piece to be "too sad."

Fair enough too. Her group, Head High, which offers bereavement support to young people who have lost someone to suicide, was co-founded by Samantha and her sister Cassie, 22, and brother William, 21, after their father Ken passed away six years ago. Suicide as an issue is one that tends to be dealt with rather solemnly - one that many seem to prefer to skirt around or only talk about in hushed tones.

But 24-year-old Samantha, who is expecting her first child, wants to bring the issue out into the open. "I wish it was talked about a bit more by other people, but it's still a 'funny' subject. If we talked about it openly, it might help prevent these sorts of things happening in the future."

Head High, which meets once a month, has an emphasis on fun at its meetings.

"We wanted it to be really informal," says Samantha, a hotel receptionist. "It's not sit-down, like an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. You don't have to introduce yourself if you don't want to. There's food - that's a priority. We have sausage sizzles and pizza. It needs to be fun and allow people to talk about their problems; although they don't have to if they don't want to. What is really cool about it is that everyone there knows that they are in the same boat and that they're not the odd ones out."

Samantha was 18 when her father died. "I was just finishing school. It was my last year. It happened around Christmas time, which is already an interesting time of year."

Along with dealing with the loss, Samantha says one of the hardest things to cope with, surprisingly, was a sense of shame. "There are all sorts of emotions you go through - grief, anger, denial, blame. But I also just felt so weird at the start, like I was from some sort of crazy, stupid, weird family that couldn't function properly. I thought people were thinking, 'They are so screwed up'. It's more embarrassment. And then there's people not knowing what to say to you. When I did tell people, they'd kind of hold their breath and turn white."

Also proving difficult was getting helpful information on the issue, especially as a young person. Samantha didn't want to bother her mum Pauline about it, as she felt she was traumatised enough, and her friends were not the shoulders to lean on she needed.

"At that sort of age, your friends aren't really that helpful. They're into parties, boyfriends and clothes. You don't expect them to get it, and really, there's no reason they should."

So instead she turned to the internet, but it didn't always provide the kind of support she was hoping for either. "I was 18 and thinking, 'What the hell just happened and how do I get help?' So, I tried to research it on the net. But the kind of sites I often hit upon were very hurtful and unhelpful for people who

are looking to mend what is left of their lives. If you typed the wrong word in Google, lots of evil or Satan-like pages would come up. Plus, any good supportive information that did come up was generally from overseas, which wasn't accessible for a kid in Australia wanting someone appropriate to talk to."

The lack of helpful online information was what originally sparked the Sunshine Coast support group. Samantha says, "We just knew that there was a lack of information out there and that there was certainly an interest in such a group. It was very hard getting it going to begin with because a lot of people didn't want to talk about suicide and because we were dealing with children, but we pushed on. We just thought it was important."

And their determination has been the key to their success. The group has since fielded interest from people as far as Melbourne and New Zealand, and some have travelled from places such as Queensland's Hervey Bay to attend group meetings.

“There are all sorts of emotions you go through - grief, anger, denial, blame - but there is also, somehow, embarrassment.”

Head High, under the auspices of 'SunnyKids', has also won a few awards, including a youth gong at the Life Awards, held annually to mark World Suicide Prevention Day on September 10.

Samantha says providing information online, including access to other support groups, has proven really useful. "A lot of the kids have lost fathers or mothers, so it makes it harder for them to access group meetings. They might not be able to drive or be out at night, but the internet makes this kind of help much more accessible. We are

currently looking for a corporate sponsor to help fund further development on our online support area, and welcome any offers!"

Those who can come to physical meetings often show positive signs of change, which Samantha finds rewarding. "It's good to see the younger kids go from being very quiet to opening up, dropping in and saying hello, and letting us know what they're up to."

For Samantha, dealing with suicide has certainly made her grow up fast. "It changes the way you view life. You'll never be the same person again, especially as a kid. But you just have to keep going. That's what we hold onto - the fact that we hopefully are helping other people somehow."

And just like the name of the group she founded and helps to run, Samantha can hold her head high, proudly helping others in need. ■

Head High relies on community support and donations. To help out financially, visit www.headhigh.org.au. The group meets on the first Friday of every month at venues across the Sunshine Coast. For further information contact the Operations Manager at SunnyKids on 5479 0394.

Looking for support?

Head High www.headhigh.org.au
Lifeline 13 11 14

Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800
Standby 0407 766 961