

Sons' deaths spark crusade

By Charlie Pearl
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Soldiers cry, even a high-ranking Army commander.

Maj. Gen. Mark Graham and his wife, Carol, formerly of Frankfort, shared their personal story of loss, overwhelming grief and finding hope at a suicide prevention conference in the Frankfort Convention Center Friday morning.



They were the keynote speakers to a group of about 300, many of whom have lost family members and friends to suicide.



Six years ago the Grahams lost both sons within eight months – one by suicide, the other in Army combat in Iraq.

The youngest, Kevin, hanged himself at his apartment in June 2003 when he was a senior ROTC cadet at the University of Kentucky.

Then Jeffrey, 24, a UK engineering graduate, died Feb. 19, 2004 in a roadside bomb blast in Iraq.

Kevin, a scholarship student studying to be an Army doctor, died “fighting a different kind of battle...depression,” his father said. “He stopped taking his medication because he did not want the Army to know about his illness.”

To lose one son “was the heaviest burden imaginable at that time,” Graham said. “But to lose both our sons was truly beyond comprehension.”

While recalling the day they learned of Jeffrey’s death, Mark Graham’s voice broke, tears came to his eyes and he paused before saying, “This is why I write this (speech) down because I cannot get through this.”

He was shaving at 5:30 a.m. when Carol came into the bathroom saying she’d just read on the Internet that two U.S. soldiers were killed in Khaldiya, Iraq, where Jeffrey was stationed as a platoon leader.

“Never in a million years would you believe it’s your other son,” he said. “It could not be true, not again.”

But it was.

Before 2003, “we thought we had one of those Walt Disney families,” Graham said. “Our three children (including daughter Melanie) were college students sharing an apartment at UK.

“But with one phone call the world as we knew it was gone. We will never be the same, ever.”

Even now after six years, he says many mornings he still wakes up “thinking maybe it’s all a bad dream. Our children had been our whole life, our whole world. So to keep on living we had to find a helpful way to channel our dream.”

After Jeffrey’s death and burial in Frankfort Cemetery, next to Kevin’s grave, the Grahams returned to Fort Sill, Okla. And the highly decorated Army colonel, who was later promoted to a general, thought he had to get out of the military.

The Grahams tried to persuade daughter Melanie to move to Oklahoma to be near them, but she said, “You all make me too sad.”

Eventually Mark Graham determined his true calling was to stay in the Army and help spread the vital message that getting treatment for depression is a sign of strength, not weakness, especially with the stress of armed service.

“Our journey has tested our faith, it has rattled our moral courage and left us feeling empty and hopeless at times,” said Graham, a former commanding general in Fort Carson, Colo., who is assuming a new role at Fort McPherson in Atlanta.

“Most importantly, though, it has provided us direction and revealed an enormous purpose for our lives.”

He says there are many wounded soldiers and often the unseen wounds are the toughest to heal.

“As an Army and a nation we need to get in front of suicide,” he said. “We must work to prevent it by action, not just speaking about it after the fact.

“We must all acknowledge the toll suicide is taking on our Army, our communities and our nation, and to raise the awareness of the dangers of untreated depression.”

For too many years fear and ignorance have created a stigma that has kept people from recognizing the warning signs of depression and suicide, Graham said.

Suicide, “just the word makes you cringe,” he said. “The word evokes a multitude of emotions, perceptions and judgments. A hush-hush tone is commonly used when suicide is mentioned...

“We cannot keep quiet any longer. We cannot take that hushed tone when speaking of suicide. We cannot ignore the warning signs. People are hurting. They need to be helped, not judged.”

He said he and his wife missed the warning signs of Kevin’s depression.

“I just could not see that his illness if left untreated was potentially as deadly as if he had cancer or heart disease,” he said.

Carol Graham, who met her husband when both attended Murray State University, said, “After Kevin died, I felt like the worst mother in the world – shame, embarrassment, guilt, to lose a son to suicide. Part of that will never go away.”

She said she had been a high school guidance counselor in Los Angeles and nobody ever told her suicide was the second leading cause of death in college students.

She blames herself for not noticing warning signs. She recalled Kevin – a straight A student and an avid Shakespeare reader – telling her over the phone he thought his brain must not work anymore because he was having trouble understanding Hamlet.

“If he had called and said, ‘My lungs don’t work, my heart doesn’t work, my kidneys don’t work,’ I would have been all over it,” Carol said. “But sometimes when people say, ‘My brain doesn’t work,’ we don’t take it seriously.”

After their sons’ deaths, Mark said, “so many people from all over seemed to come to help us, to give us the courage to keep on living. The ones that helped us the most were the ones that they, themselves, had survived unimaginable tragedies.

“Many of you are in this room. Because our hearts were completely broken and our stories so unbelievable, we were then opened for them to share with us their deepest thoughts, losses.”

They’ve learned that deep sorrow can bring a great sense of compassion for others. The Grahams have made a commitment to continue serving soldiers and their families. It hasn’t been easy.

The military culture is “one of suck-it-up toughness,” Mark said. But in the Army the stigma of suicide “is being broken down,” he said. “We are eliminating the stigma one day at a time but it will take a long time.”

Now when soldiers enter basic training, they’re given a playing card – an ace of hearts with instructions on the back. The letters A-C-E represent the words “ask, care and

escort” – the steps all soldiers are expected to take if they suspect depression among one of their comrades.

“Years ago people thought if you mentioned the word suicide it could cause someone to take their own life,” Mark said. “We now know that is a myth. If you ask someone if they are thinking of taking their own life or harming someone else, they will tell you.

“You can listen to them and care for them and then instead of telling them you need help, you escort them to help, just as you would a friend with a broken leg or arm.”

Over the years Graham said he has learned a lot about leadership.

“The single most important lesson I have learned is that no one is isolated from hardship,” he said. “Everyone seems to be going through something, either directly or indirectly. Leaders are human and just as vulnerable as anyone else.”

Helping others has helped the Grahams in their healing, Mark said.

“Gradually, little by little, we could feel ourselves growing stronger, and we began to even smile and laugh.”

The more they share their personal story the more they realize Kevin and Jeffrey are with them, Mark said. “We carry them with us everywhere.

“We’ve experienced the highest highs and the lowest lows. But through it all we have clung to our faith and each other and we have become more determined in our life’s journey.

“We value every relationship we have and take nothing for granted. There will always be a hole and a void in my heart. My boys will never be a weakness in my life. They will always be my strength.”

He said daughter Melanie, “who experienced more pain and sorrow by age 20 than most people do in a lifetime,” eventually moved to Oklahoma and earned a bachelor’s in nursing. She made a decision to use her pain and grief to help others for the rest of her life, he said.

Graham encouraged the audience to help them in their mission of breaking through the fear and stigma surrounding suicide.

“We are compelled to speak out to all the Kevins of the world who have no voice,” he said. “One life lost to suicide causes a ripple effect that is felt by so many for the rest of their lives. This morning’s gathering is about hope.

“Reach out and be the tourniquet that stops the bleeding of these precious souls.”

