



The walls in Mark and Carol Graham's Fort Carson, Colo., home are dotted with photos of their children. There are the oldest two, sons Jeff and Kevin, smiling as toddlers in matching red, white and blue shirts; golfing as teens; and Melanie, posing with her big brothers on the Great Wall of China. Jeff's pictorial time line stops at age 24, Kevin's with a still-baby-faced portrait at 21. In February 2004 Army 2nd Lt. Jeff Graham died saving his platoon from a bomb on a bridge in Khalidiyah, Iraq. Near his photos are the plaques and flags that were showered on the Grahams to commemorate this fallen hero.

Eight months earlier, ROTC cadet Kevin Graham, suffering from depression, hanged himself in his apartment at the University of Kentucky. Kevin had expected to follow his father and brother into the service as an Army doctor. He never had the opportunity to earn any stars, though a friend fashioned one from wood, which the Grahams display. "You get all this honor and respect when your son dies trying to warn his platoon, and I'm thinking, 'Kevin would have done that too,'" says Carol, 53. Her husband, Maj. Gen. Mark Graham, a 32-year military man who served in Desert Storm, adds quietly, "My sons died fighting different battles."

Now this decorated veteran, 54, faces a war on two fronts: He prepares troops for battle, until recently as commander of Fort Carson and Division West-First Army. He also helps lead the Army's response to the rise in suicides among its troops (see box). In 2008, 140 soldiers killed themselves, pushing the Army's suicide rate past that of the U.S. population for the first time. Since June, there have been 88 suspected cases. "We're devastated," says Maj. Gen. Graham. "To lose one soldier to suicide is too many."

He helped make Ft. Carson, where nine soldiers took their lives within 15 months, the epicenter of the Army's new approach to prevention. Along with many other measures, including a hotline, Ft. Carson now uses a training video that features Graham pleading, "I've lost a son to suicide.... Let us help you."

This open display of emotion marks a profound change for Graham. After Kevin's death, he says, "it was over a year before I could speak about it." Besides being a grieving father, he was the product of a military that stigmatized mental health problems. Now, he says, "we tell soldiers we expect them to come forward, just as if you broke your leg, you would get help." It is a slow but crucial attitude shift. "People used to say, 'Don't mention the word suicide because it might cause someone to take his own life.' What we know now is you need to ask. They normally won't hide it when you directly ask."

It's just part of what the Grahams understand about depression that they wish they had learned earlier. A decorated ROTC cadet, Kevin was a junior at U of K when he was screened at the university clinic in the fall of 2002 and started to take an antidepressant. "He was always smiling. I didn't know inside he was so sad,"

People
August 17, 2009

says Carol, who believes he went off his medication in the spring of 2003 while preparing for ROTC summer camp.

In one of their last phone conversations that June, Kevin told Carol about playing a life-simulating video game for nearly three days without sleep. "He sounded horrible. He said that [in the game] 'I did everything the world says is success. I went to the right schools, married the right girl, got my kids in boarding schools, worked my way up the corporate ladder. At my retirement ceremony ... even the President came.' Then he said, 'I hate the way the world measures us.' You know what I said? 'Hon, you need to get some sleep.' I didn't know." His father even offered to pay Kevin's tuition if he wanted out of the ROTC scholarship. "He said, 'But Dad, you know the soldier's creed. I'd be a quitter.'"

His sister, then also his roommate, recalls seeing him close his door after midnight on June 21. "I really didn't think anything of it. Kevin was the perfect son," says Melanie, now 25 and a nurse in Boston. The next morning she discovered his body hanging by a power cord from his ceiling fan. "We will never know the struggle he had that night," says Carol, then stationed with her husband in South Korea.

On hearing the news, Carol crawled from their bedroom to the dining room to get her Bible. "I didn't know you could die from depression," she says. Adds her husband: "We blamed ourselves: Why didn't we see it?"

After his brother's death, Jeff was told by the Army that he would not have to deploy. "But he was determined," says Carol. Jeff left for Iraq on Nov. 15, Kevin's birthday. "Melanie and I both knew Jeffrey wasn't coming home. I just had this feeling." Jeff and another member of his company were killed Feb. 19, 2004, by a bomb. "All I remember thinking was that the boys were together," she says through tears.

Condolence calls and bouquets poured in. They wondered, Where were these mourners for Kevin? "Everybody is treating you totally different," says Carol. Leaving a funeral home for the second time in eight months, the Grahams made a decision. At a stoplight Mark Graham said, "The loss of the boys can either be the whole book of our lives, or it can be two tragic chapters." Soon after, they started the Jeff and Kevin Graham Memorial Fund to prevent suicide on college campuses.

Years passed before he would discuss the issue among the ranks. In 2006 a military-family survivors' group, TAPS, asked him to speak. Losing a loved one in war is a frequent topic on that circuit, and he expected they wanted to hear about Jeff. Instead, for the first time, he was asked to address suicide. It was a turning point: Since then, he has spoken about it often. "I hope it's helped," he says. "To be frank, it's not easy. It's horrendous."

People
August 17, 2009

At a May seminar, Ronnie Barrett, whose son killed himself with pills on a third tour in Iraq, wept listening to the Grahams. "I thought I was the only one to experience this," Barrett says.

On Aug. 6 the Grahams moved to Ft. McPherson in Atlanta. Here, they have unpacked and rehung those photos, flags and stars. And here they will continue educating soldiers about suicide. "There are people hurting," Graham says, "and we need to recognize it." Yet as dedicated as he is to his mission, the Major General admits, "I'd give this all up in a heartbeat just to see my boys again. They were great young men."

Know a hero? Send suggestions to heresamongus@peoplemag.com

MORE FROM THIS ARTICLE

Graham Family Album

CHRISTMAS 2002 "I don't want anyone to characterize Kevin's life by that one act; he was so much more than that," says Graham (with Kevin, left, and Jeff).

JUNE 1989 Graham (center) says his sons were so close, they had their own language: "Grahamese."

WINTER 2001 "They were my best friends," says Melanie (with Jeff, left, and Kevin in China).

Responding to a Crisis

Experts point to multiple deployments, untreated depression and PTSD as possible reasons for the spike in soldier suicides. "So much exposure to pain, fear, injury and death sets them apart from many of the rest of us," says Thomas Joiner, author of *Why People Die by Suicide*. In March the Army ordered all units to take part in suicide-prevention education. "Many soldiers came forward to ask for help. That's breaking down the stigma," says Graham. "It's a culture change that takes time."

People
August 17, 2009