

SUICIDE PREVENTION AND CRISIS SERVICE OF TOMPKINS COUNTY, NEW YORK

# THE EMPTY CHAIRS PROJECT: LOSS AFTER SUICIDE

FOR A SON, A MOTHER, A FATHER, A NEPHEW & A STRANGER.  
OUR FRIENDS AND LOVERS. OUR SISTERS AND BROTHERS.



## DID YOU KNOW:

Over 32,000 Americans die by suicide every year. Twice as many die through suicide than homicide. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among young people.

## THESE EMPTY CHAIRS WERE MADE TO:

create visible and meaningful symbols of the grief and loss felt by those who have lost a loved one to suicide; Raise awareness about suicide and suicide prevention; Commemorate 40 years of service in Tompkins County and the Finger Lakes region of New York by Suicide Prevention & Crisis Service

## THESE CHAIRS WERE MADE BY:

Kenny Berkowitz, Nina Chasnoff, Caroline Cox, Helen Kuveke, Lee-Ellen Marvin, Jayme Peck, Kathryn D. Redman, Cecile Scott, Jan Simpson, Meghan Wheeler & Ryan Young with Lisa Fasanella and Debby Delpopolo

## WITH HELP FROM:

Marie Sirakos, project conception; Pamela Moss, teaching artist; Lee-Ellen Marvin, coordinator & designer; Matt Gray, photographer; The Kendal Wood Shop

## MADE POSSIBLE BY:

the generous support of the Park Foundation and assistance from the M&T Charitable Foundation.

## SUICIDE PREVENTION & CRISIS SERVICE

is celebrating its 40th anniversary as a non-profit organization committed to promoting constructive responses to crisis and trauma and to prevent violence to self and others through direct support and community education.

THE CRISISLINE AT 607-272-1616  
PROVIDES FREE CONFIDENTIAL CRISIS  
COUNSELING 24 HOURS A DAY.

# The Empty Chairs: Loss after Suicide



## **Lori Figelman** **by Kenny Berkowitz for a friend**

The last time I spoke with my friend Lori Zahara Figelman, she talked about her plans to counsel young women; the next time I saw her, a few days later, she was walking to the suspension bridge to kill herself. It's been seventeen years since then, and when I closed my eyes, the image of this chair immediately came to mind: a bone white, straight-backed kitchen chair with a vine climbing up to God. Jews generally keep their memorials simple and unadorned, which is probably why I chose to make the chair out of pine, the traditional material for coffins, and why I wanted to turn the chair into a tree of life. The paint is made from milk; the pothos recalls a plant cutting I took from Lori's room; the quote comes from her diary; and the Star of David was found on the street a few years after her death.

Made with: pine chair, pothos plant, milk, tempera, and silver.

Photos by Gray Photography of Cortland, NY

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## **The Beachfront**

**by Nina Chasnoff for Robert Chasnoff, her father**

I lost my father at the age of 20. After more than 20 years of dealing with this loss, I felt I could give some support to others dealing with suicide issues, but I did not expect to be so deeply moved by the process of creating a chair and talking to others who have experienced these losses. The white box with the red bow is a symbol that resulted from a hypnotic trance. People ask me what is in the box. I honestly don't know. The box may mean any number of things. Perhaps it is a gift: one given and one taken away.

Appreciation for: Photography and tons of artistic inspiration by Damaris ([www.damarisphotography.com](http://www.damarisphotography.com)). Original artwork by Kevin Mayer ([www.kevinmayerart.com](http://www.kevinmayerart.com)). Technical support by Dallas Kroon. Music by Amanda Rogers ([myspace.com/amandarogers](http://myspace.com/amandarogers)). Eliza VanCort and all of the amazing participants and instructors at the Actor's Workshop of Ithaca ([www.actorsworkshop.biz](http://www.actorsworkshop.biz)).

Made with: paper, glue, sealer, finish, original written pieces by Nina Chasnoff and Robert Chasnoff, digital photo frame, moss, photo paper, some cat fur, wood.

Photos by Gray Photography of Cortland, NY

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## **Memories' Mist**

**by Caroline Cox for Philip West Ulrey, her brother**

The old, well-used lab chair acts as a memento of my brother Philip West Ulrey's very real life, full of shining promise as a Ph. D. candidate at Cal Tech. Although he died 52 years ago, my memories still come back, as grounded as the lab chair, stark as the rifle, swathed by a grief, a mourning most of all for the death of friendship that could have lived between us.

Thanks to: My dearest sons Jason Ulrey Violette and Banks Ulrey Violette, who are my brightest memories; my beloved husband (and inspired wood crafter) Gerry Cox.

Made with: lab chair; metallic, organza, and flannel fabrics; wood.

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## **Henry Emde: A Life**

**by Lisa Fasanella, Ryan Young, & Debby Delpopolo for Hank Emde, brother and friend**

This 360 degree retrospective piece covers the joys and pleasures of Henry Emde, "Hank". The feature section, seat and back, show points during Hank's dance career with Debby as well as life with his best friend and sister, Lisa. His greatest memories were of these times. The bird house features pictures of Hank with his pets, whom he cared for immensely. The remaining panels on the chair cover Hank's hobbies, travels, favorite movies, music, friends and three great loves. The pedestal column displays other treasured memories, while the main support panel, or base, displays Hank's obituary and photos of his urn.

Our loss is expressed in the hastily cracked off leg of the chair. A chair leg is a main source of support but here an integral part of its structure has been broken away.

Made with: photos, *decopage*, and scrap booking materials on primed wood.

# The Empty Chairs: Loss after Suicide



## **Empty Chair for Laurie** **by Helen Kuveke for Laurie, a stranger**

In the spring of 2007 my boyfriend Jayme and I witnessed a woman named Laurie jump off the bridge on Stewart Avenue. Less than five minutes after I hysterically called 911 the area was flooded with people: police officers, paramedics, and firefighters, and then scared and inquiring college students who came pouring out of the nearby houses. The humanity of the rescue teams struck me hard. I saw pain and fear in their faces as they looked over the bridge, their professionalism both intact and momentarily suspended hoping to see something other than a crumpled body at the bottom of the gorge. Any one of these people could have helped Laurie, but she hadn't realized to ask. The help was there but she couldn't feel it, and she took her life for lack of it. This chair is a brightly-colored stage set for the moments right after her body had been carefully removed and everyone in the great crowd started to walk away, numb and scared. I am still up there in the parking lot adjacent to the bridge, crying, not seen, and my boyfriend is trying to lead me away.

Thanks to Greg for answering the phone that night. To all my friends and family who let me talk and cry about what I saw. To Jayme, for meeting me on the bridge, then and always. And to the Creator, and the Spirit World, for watching over us, and for taking care of us when it is our turn.

Made with: spray paint and tempera paint, beads, rocks, glass pebbles, fabric, wire, feathers, found kitchen chair.

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## **The Frame of a Friendship** by Lee-Ellen Marvin for Beverly H. Apgar, a friend

We were just getting to know each other. Times were hard, she was struggling with her business but I didn't know her well and didn't have the guts to pry into her troubles. I had an intuition that I should have pursued. For that, I am so sorry.

I have built this chair to ask us all to not confuse our economic struggles with our self-worth as human beings.

Thanks for Maureen Beardsley for finding the chair, to Diane Maluso for her love, support and woodworking tools, to Deb for finding many hangers, to Bonnie Bennet for giving this project her blessing.

Made with: old wooden chair, stripped and sanded, with wooden hangers, shredded and knotted linen clothing, and regrets.

# The Empty Chairs: Loss after Suicide



**I'll never see you...**

**by Jayme Peck for Laurie, a stranger**

The day was bright and cheerful, full of light and color, but as we drove over that bridge and watched her disappear over the ledge, a darkness enveloped us, like being struck from the blast of an emotional bomb. The chair represents the timeline of that event, and the visage that will forever play in my head; looking down over the ledge and seeing the broken body of a person I'd never even met. I used spray paint as the main material do to its minimal level of control which bleeds into chaos, representing that balance that we all struggle with in our lives. Ultimately that balance that she struggled with was one that affected us all in such a profound way.

Thanks to Helen Kuveke for always being there, even when it's not easy.

Made with: chair with spray paint and caution tape.

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## **The Sentence**

**by Kathryn D. Redman for Kevin James Quirk, her brother**

The resilience and courage of survivors is recognized and respected with this work. With suicide comes a life sentence for the survivors. The figure symbolizes the grief that comes to reside in the seat left empty. This unique brand of grief weaves itself into the fabric of life - in and throughout everything the survivor will ever more say, do and think. It changes the survivor forever. For the rest of their lives survivors deal with not only a physical and emotional loss but all the questions as well: the "what if's" the "maybe's" the "how's" the "why's" - the "could haves", the "would haves" and the "should haves" and all the accompanying feelings. Because there are no answers to these questions survivors will always grapple with them.

Thanks to: A special thank you to my always-wonderful and always-supportive husband, Ben who was instrumental in the design and construction of the project. A special thank you also to my wonderful son, Kyle for the enthusiasm and creativity he brought to the project.

Made with: burlap-upholstered chair with figure comprised of paper mache and plaster cast over foam and copper wire armature.

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## **Waiting for Jason**

**by Cecile Scott for Jason "Jay Jay" Belodoff, her son**

My son Jason had a favorite black recliner in which he would sit with his vizsla, Clayton. When I heard about the chair project, one of the first images that came to me was Clayton sitting in the recliner waiting for Jason's return. This confusion, unending sorrow and tremendous longing are what I feel everytime I think of my son. These feelings are what I am hoping to capture in the selection and placement of the items. The hiking boots nearby on the rug, the throw over the back of the chair, the dog pillow representing Clayton, all frozen in time, waiting for Jason to walk back in the door.

Thank you to my sister, Jan Simpson, for finding the chair and for all of her support throughout the project. Thanks also to sister, Marianne, who searched the internet endlessly for needed items. Thank you to Julie Froio, Patty O'Donnell and Jason Gunn of GSG Vincent Furniture Restoration. Thank you to the other artists who participated and were such a great support. And to daughter, Lisa for her constant support and encouragement.

Made with: old recliner found on "Craig's List" with new cover, blanket, pillow, rug, and hiking boots.

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## Into the Light

by Jan Simpson for Jason Belodoff, her nephew

As I participated in this project, it struck me that each person lost to suicide leaves many "empty chairs". Every person whose life was touched by the individual ... family, friends, co-workers ... has an empty place in their heart where they were. When I think of Jason, there is an undeniable warmth and lightness that pushes away the sadness. He brought joy and laughter to the lives of many. There was, though, undoubtedly a dark cloud that was frequently a part of his life. Jason, your journey ended too soon, but you changed so many lives for the better while you were here. I love you and miss you.

With thanks to my sons, Matt and Nick, for the encouragement when I questioned my artistic abilities. My partner Kim whose patience and support has helped me release my inner artist. And most of all, my sister Cecile, whose amazing strength and courage inspire me to be a better person.

Made with: *Adirondack* chair, acrylic paint, quilter's batting, sand.

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## **Sunset Rose** by Meghan Wheeler for Virginia, her mother

When I was coming up with ideas on how to paint a chair that would in some way convey a sense of my mother I thought of two. One idea was much darker and focused on her actual act of suicide. But I chose the idea that centered on how I feel now about the loss of my mother. I am much more at peace and much more forgiving of her decision. I have made a choice to remember her for the love, compassion, spontaneity and energy she had rather than the pain she left behind and I felt as though I needed to portray that in a way she would find most befitting.

Thanks to my friends and family whose patience, humor and forgiveness have helped me overcome insurmountable odds. To Ces for introducing me to the project, finding the chair and for always giving the most amazing hugs. And to my wonderful, adoring boyfriend whose unwavering help and support helped to make this project a reality.

Made with: old Victorian style chair, primer, acrylic paint, sand, glue and artificial flower.

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