

ESSAY / OCTOBER 2018 / WALTER PROULX

Handling Suicide on Campus

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TRIGGER WARNING: This article discusses suicide and death, which may be triggering topics for some. If your mental health could be affected by this topic, please read this at your own discretion.

On Wednesday, March 28, 2018, Ethan Parker took his life on campus at Champlain College. Vice President of Student Affairs Angela Batista sent out an email the next morning on Thursday, March 29, that informed students of his passing. This email also included details about the drop-in counseling sessions for students. On Tuesday, April 10, Angela Batista sent out another email that released the cause of death and let students know about a memorial service that would take place a few weeks later. "It is the family's hope to raise awareness about suicide prevention and to remind anyone who may need support to reach out," Batista wrote.

Chivomengro published an article regarding suicide on college campuses, Ethan's specifically. It felt wrong to pretend nothing happened. Unfortunately, we weren't prepared for the situation, and we made mistakes. We weren't educated on standard procedure for dealing with suicide on college campuses. At the end of the year, we decided to write a follow-up article and I volunteered to help with it.

This wasn't the first time I had been a part of a community that was impacted by a suicide. When I was six years old, I ended up meeting my best friend Lynn because we both had something in common. I had lost my mother to bacterial spinal meningitis; he lost his father to suicide that same year. Lynn helped me through a lot during my childhood. Back then, I didn't comprehend how Lynn's father died, I just related to him because we both had a huge part of our world missing. Now that I am 20, I have a better idea of what happened. Just imagining what Lynn's father was going through is overwhelming.



"I heard a student died." It was one of my friends in EATS telling me about a rumor.

"I know," I responded. "I think it was suicide."

My friend shook his head. "That's not necessarily true. I heard it might have been drugs, you never know."

At that moment my face went red. I did know what happened the previous night. One of Ethan's friends told me just about everything that unfolded. I was beyond angry that within a few hours, rumors were already spreading about Ethan Parker's death. I was angry that Champlain College did not announce the cause of death while lots of people speculated at what had occurred. What made me absolutely livid was that most people didn't know Ethan Parker: myself included. Part of me hoped I could make more sense of this confusion and anger by reflecting and researching. Writing this article seemed like a natural next step.

My research started this summer with articles shared with me by various members of *Chivomengro*. Reading the first article about a suicide at Hamilton College (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/12/us/college-student-suicide-hamilton.html>) was hard. The article just made it feel like someone was ripping out my heart. This particular case talked about the shock the parents went through not knowing that their child was having any troubles in college. They wanted to know if their child was struggling, but colleges in the United States are obligated to protect the privacy of the student. Throughout this article, they constantly reference the college as an institution following policy and maybe not being prepared for such an event. Nowhere are the students or the community mentioned. This bothered me, but at the time I couldn't figure out why. It would take a lot more research for me to understand this.

I started looking at POSTVENTION (https://adaa.org/sites/default/files/postvention_guide-suicide-college.pdf): a document regarding what colleges should do in response to a suicide on campus. On page 13, it stated: "the first message to the community may be letting them know that official information cannot be conveyed until the family is notified." Champlain did not explain that they would follow up with students and we did not know how long we would be left in the dark.

On page 16, it reads: "avoid misinformation and offer hope." Champlain College had their hands tied, and I realize this now. They couldn't reveal the truth, but it would have been helpful if students received an explanation why there was a lack of information. To me, it felt like something was being hidden. Not acknowledging why he died felt like there was something to hide. This unintended side effect seems to have come from Champlain's own guidelines, which were undoubtedly out of date. Documents like *POSTVENTION* guidelines are invaluable and should be kept up to date, but this can be hard when drastic, tragic events seldom happen. It's hard to be adequately prepared for all situations.

Another week passed, and I stumbled upon another article in *The New York Times*. M.I.T. Is Not responsible for Student's Suicide, Court Rules (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/07/us/mit-student-suicide-lawsuit.html>) by Katharine Q. Seelye. If the school wasn't responsible, who was? Yet another article that doesn't mention students and the community. I still couldn't figure out why this bothered me.

Another article

(http://www.healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2017/01/HSVR_injury_suicidemortality.pdf) stated that in 2015, the Vermont Suicide Prevention Coalition reported that there were approximately 700 suicides a year in Vermont. 700 devastated communities a year. This is 35% higher than the national average. It doesn't seem possible.



All I could think about was the poem Pine City (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zd6SSSXUAnw>) by Ollie Schminkey. Ollie talks about a death in a way that is so eloquent and yet so brutally relatable. I find it hard to deny that this is a unique experience.

“Jordan, I shouldn’t give a shit about you. I don’t know you. I don’t know where you come from, except, that it is the same place I come from.”

I walked the same halls, I crossed Ethan’s path, yet I didn’t know where he came from. My portrait of Ethan was only painted with a description from his friend and what I imagined a Champlain College student would be like. It didn’t matter how well I knew him, but it did matter that he was a student just like I was. Ethan could have had the same teachers that I had. The fact that we could have had many of the same shared experiences hit home.

Between all the research, I decided to start watching a new show on Hulu. It was called *Please Like Me*. I thought this might have been a good way to relax. I was wrong. However, it was thought-provoking.

In the show, the mother of the main character would attempt suicide within the first couple of episodes. It was up to the main character, Josh, to take care of his unstable mom. Although the show wasn't real, it felt authentic. The characters were real people with real flaws. No one was perfect for once.

The main character is played by Josh Thomas, who is also the creator of the show. Like the character he plays on television, his mother also attempted suicide when he was a teenager. He really wanted to portray mental illness in an honest way. "Often we tell stories of suicide on television and it helps you understand why different people make different choices," Thomas said in an interview (<https://ew.com/tv/2017/12/29/josh-thomas-please-like-me-final-season/>) with *Entertainment Weekly*. The show also explores the reaction of the community when a suicide occurs. It shows how others are "deeply changed", but also how they move on. In the midst of tragedy, Josh and his friends wake up in the morning, laugh, cry, and dance. They are a community that will always be deeply affected by a single tragedy.

Watching *Please Like Me* made me realize what was bothering me during all this research. While articles are constantly reporting what happens on college campuses and how a college handles the situation, no one talks about the community of students involved.

The problem with not mentioning the student community is that it completely takes the responsibility off everyone not directly involved. There is a cultural phenomenon that allows Americans to be completely oblivious to their neighbors. Individuals are not expected to look out for one another. If someone is suffering, everyone is allowed to watch without helping out.



As the summer came to a close, I understood why I was angry the day after Ethan passed. The letter Champlain sent regarding Ethan felt so generic because they *couldn't* say anything. The rumors felt distasteful because the people spreading those rumors didn't know Ethan. As a community, it felt like there were few people who knew Ethan at all. I was part of that community. When the memorials passed and people picked back up where they left off, nothing looked different. My world didn't change when I feel it should have.

If 700 people die by suicide in Vermont every year, it feels wrong to keep going on without addressing the topic. It feels like some action should have been taken. Some problem should have been addressed. It would have been valuable to see some follow up from the community trying to make sure something like this would never happen again. Instead, it felt like everyone, myself included, watched without taking the uncomfortable step of reaching out to others.

Fortunately, communities can change. Although it might be very uncomfortable to reach out to someone you don't know, genuinely asking how someone is feeling can make a huge difference. Small acts of kindness, checking in with neighbors, can make a difference. It may not be the solution that fixes everything, but it's a step in the right direction.

Champlain College and the State of Vermont have resources which we have provided below. If you or someone you know needs help, please reach out.

Champlain College Counseling Center: (802) 865-5731

Counseling Center's After Hours Crisis Line: (802) 865-5745

Vermont Suicide Prevention Lifeline: (800) 273-8255

VT Crisis Text Line: Text "VT" to 741741

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