

Suicide and Law Enforcement

Thoughts of a Survivor

Donna G. Schulz

Wife of FBI Special Agent Bruce Schulz

It is such an honor to be asked to write an article for PBA's Blue Review Newsletter. As a former PBA member, it's good to see your commitment to learn more about keeping our Finest, each of you and your colleagues, out of harm's way. Within law enforcement there are serious problems, critical issues that must be dealt with. There were nine suicides within the FBI Family the year my husband died. Statistics show that every 24 hours an officer will die from suicide.....It could be someone you work with today, who's gone tomorrow. More officers die from suicide than from "line-of-duty" deaths – at least three times more according to Tears of a Cop (TOAC) – a sad, terrible waste of America's Finest.

As I started writing down my thoughts, I found it still to be almost overwhelming, even after so many years have passed and after telling Bruce's story to so many cops. In Florida, we have offered 2-day seminars, IN HARM'S WAY: Tactics for Psychological Survival in Law Enforcement, numerous times. We have also assisted Kansas and Arizona and are working to take this training national with BJA funding, yet it never seems to get any easier. Bruce's death cannot be in vain; some good must come out of it. There is much that I would like to share with you in hopes that perhaps we can begin to understand the whys and do something about this awesome tragedy. I'd like to tell you one agent's story....

Bruce was proud to be an FBI Special Agent. It was his highest achievement, his life's goal. He was a superb agent, father, son, and husband. He served his country unstintingly and gave of himself to his family and to the Bureau. I don't begin to know the answers of why he killed himself. I don't even fully understand the problems; but what I do know is that I lost my best friend, the love of my life, and it didn't have to happen.

Since my husband's death on March 8, 1995, I've tried to piece together what made it happen and why. He was the strongest man I've ever known, the rock of our family; our boys idolized him; and now he's gone. He received outstanding evaluations and letters of commendation from numerous national security agencies; he was a foreign counter-intelligence agent. FBI Director Freeh even presented him with a meritorious award posthumously and wrote a tribute about his contributions; he spoke about Bruce's commitment to country at his memorial service. He called him a true American hero. Yet Bruce did not feel fit to live. This proud, brave man died in his boxer shorts, unable even to get dressed. Something is seriously wrong to reduce a man to this.

Bruce had always been a fighter, a survivor, a high achiever, a team player, a straight arrow. He joined the Marines as a teenager, turning 21 in Okinawa after 2 tours in Viet Nam. He came home with no fanfare and much degradation from Americans, went to college to earn a B.S. degree in criminology, and became a Tallahassee Police Officer, where we met. He served for eight years in Uniform Patrol, on the SWAT Team, and in the Vice/Narcotics Unit. He excelled as a police officer and investigator, handling major cases and serving on the Big Bend Narcotics Task Force, working

significant drug trafficking and money laundering cases in both state and federal court. He wanted to work more in-depth cases and better serve his country so he applied for and was sworn into the FBI in 1984.

He was #1 in physical fitness in his New Agent Class, even though he was the "old man" of the class. He tried out for the elite FBI HRT (Hostage Rescue Team) in 1988 and cracked three ribs the first day, but he never gave up. He continued the entire two weeks through a grueling pace of physically, mentally, and emotionally stressful activities designed to test how well a man can hold up under pressure, telling no one of his injury. He knew he couldn't make the team because his injury slowed him down, but he never quit. That's the way he was.... a self-made man who soldiered on.

I tell you all this so that you will understand why I cannot understand how this could happen. I've included photos of Bruce. I want you to look closely at his proud, smiling face; how physically fit he was; he appears on top of the world. He could be any one of you, or the officers/agents with whom you work.

I watched my husband deteriorate the last three to four weeks of his life, and I couldn't stop it. He shot and killed himself the morning of March 8, 1995, in the FBI undercover facility where we had lived in isolation and anonymity for the last year of his life. He was 45 years old. I wanted so desperately to have someone come over and try to talk with him, to help us, but no one could visit the house or know where we lived or what we did; not even other agents or family. There was no where to turn. I felt helpless and hopeless. Pacing...wringing hands....I can't do it...I begged him - let's just walk out the door and leave...Take nothing with us, just get in the car and go. We lived in a fishbowl, you see; it was the only way; but, he would not even consider it. Being an FBI Agent was who he was, how he defined himself.

After many years of thought and contemplation, there are some issues that I have identified that I think could impact the rate of suicides among law enforcement officers and agents. I would like to share my thoughts with you in hopes that we can call a halt to these losses of more than just a few good men. Let's start at the beginning.....

RECRUITMENT, RED FLAGS

Law enforcement agencies actively recruit people like Bruce -- Type A personalities -- yet don't know how to deal with them once they are hired. "Perfectionist, driven to excellence, committed, giving 110%" -- these were the words in Bruce's personnel file. A recruiter's dream, yet these qualities should be red flags. There is an inherent danger in pushing these "driven" officers/agents too far as they will feel like failures if they cannot accomplish all that is expected of them.

Why is it that some agencies don't do psychological background work (testing, interviews, screening) before hiring? The agency could then be better prepared to supervise their officers/agents effectively. Those very qualities that make them excel at their jobs are also the qualities that put them at high risk if not effectively supervised. There should be classes, both during recruit and in-service training, to teach officers about stress -- how to recognize their stress thresholds and what to do to alleviate that stress and their reaction to it. These classes should address the stigma attached to reaching out for help when stress becomes overwhelming. It must be reinforced by the agency's leadership.

SUPERVISORS

Front line supervisors should have "Interpersonal Skills" as the primary critical element in their job

description. The agents/officers know how to do the field work; the supervisors need to know how to work with them, their squad-their people. Selecting front-line supervisors with supervisory/people skills is critical. They should receive mandatory, specialized training in this before they are given a squad to supervise. They should ensure that every member of their squad feels they will be given assistance and support when they bring a problem forward. Supervisors should expressly be charged with the responsibility of recognizing the danger signs for potential problems and taking action to ensure their agents get help. But, too often supervisors and fellow officers look the other way because they're too busy, or don't want to interfere, or they're not sure what to say or do. So they do nothing. Supervisors need to learn how to reach out to their officers/agents; how to ask the difficult questions; how to be there for them.

There are 8 indicators of major depression; one need only manifest 4 in order to be considered in a major depressive episode. My husband exhibited every indicator – all eight! He lost weight, his eyes were sunken in, he was a twitching, nervous wreck. I watched him deteriorate and couldn't help enough to stop it. Yet, according to the Shooting Report, his supervisor and fellow agents, as well as the firearms instructor, saw these warning signs and did nothing.

We should all know these indicators!! Take action! Do something!! Don't be afraid to ask...you cannot give someone the idea of committing suicide. You may think, what if I'm wrong? But, cops have good instincts when it comes to reading people – trust your gut! Suicidal thoughts are often impulsive to stop the intolerable pain, a way out, not that they want to die. If we can get them past that moment and get them help, they can recover and go on with life. Your best option is to think in terms of necessary and sufficient force. Intervene as much as is necessary to keep the person alive and get him or her assistance. Trust your instincts....Reach out as soon as possible.....don't leave them alone.....ask for permission to secure their weapons....get them help....and get debriefed yourself when the situation is resolved, for your own peace of mind.

Bruce's best friend, DEA Agent Tom Slovenkay, spent time with Bruce the night before he died. Tom didn't press him too much because he thought he'd have more time to keep talking with him. He didn't. Bruce died the next morning. That was devastating for Slo. DEA's EAP program immediately kicked in to give Tom support after losing his best friend. They checked in with Tom periodically over the next year to assure he was doing OK. That's what EAP is for!!

You will never regret stepping in. You may save a life. Remember, a peace officer is more likely to be a victim of suicide than homicide. It has a devastating effect on the family, friends, and fellow officers.

Should a suicide happen within your department, your chief, sheriff, SAC should be asking for – no, requiring – counseling for the supervisor and for his/her squad. In fact, a Post Critical Incident Seminar should be held not only for the fallen officer's/agent's squad, but most assuredly for the agency at large.

STIGMA

There should NOT be a stigma attached to saying "I need help." You're in denial if you say there is no stigma. Agents and officers are afraid they'll lose face, lose their badges and guns, or that they will be targeted as unfit or "troubled." They're ashamed. The stigma is there. As cops, we don't talk about personal problems or touchy/feely issues. A huge stigma exists! Of course, being in FCI, Bruce could talk to no one....

Regular, mandatory interviews with counselors would do a lot to erase that stigma. It would be SOP to reach out and share their thoughts, their concerns, their worries, not just when they have issues. We're used to solving problems for the community; dealing with troubled people...not being a troubled person who needs help.

Ongoing training and discussion at law enforcement academies and New Agents Classes, as well as annual in-service sessions and short roll-call sessions should be mandatory to keep an open dialogue concerning the need to reach out for assistance. It must be viewed not as a weakness, but as no different than reaching out to a doctor for a physical illness. Mental illness...physical illness – what's the difference? We wouldn't hesitate to have a broken arm set or take antibiotics for the flu. Annual counseling sessions should be SOP. Thus, there would not be a stigma attached as there is no flexibility to refuse.

The U.S. Air Force has dramatically reduced their high rate of suicide by implementing a suicide prevention program. Awareness training is required for all personnel and email messages are sent out from the Air Force Chief-of-Staff, telling them that getting professional help isn't just OK.....it's a sign of personal strength.

We provide resource materials meant to be downloaded free and localized by LE agencies on the Florida Regional Community Policing Institute's webpage, www.cop.spcollege.edu/cop/. Put your logo and local phone numbers on them, reproduce them and disseminate them agency wide. Use these tools that have been evaluated and proven to be effective!! We must erase this stigma. Open and frank discussion is the only way.

WORKLOAD, OVERLOAD

There should be regular, in-depth desk reviews to assure that there is coordination. Off-duty work should be examined, as well. Supervisors need to confer. Not only when officers face shooting situations, severe murder or accident scenes, dangerous/high risk moments, but also just the every day stress of law enforcement work. Often officers cry out for help with the actions they exhibit. These signals must not be ignored or downplayed. It is everyone's responsibility to take action! Don't walk away.

OPERATION SAFE GUARD

Undercover investigators are often the most vulnerable. The nature of undercover work requires a certain level of isolation and anonymity. Operation Safe Guard (OSG) is an FBI training/assessment program to prepare agents for undercover assignments and to assess whether these agents have the personal qualities to handle these types of assignments. Before my husband's death, OSG was not available for Foreign Counter Intelligence agents, but just those infiltrating drug cartels and organized crime families. During this program, not only are the agents being assessed, but they learn about the assignment and whether they feel suited to take on this type of work. OSG also assigns someone to meet with the undercover agent regularly. That agent becomes a liaison and lifeline for the UC agent to the Bureau and to his/her family. This person is thus able to observe any problems that may develop and have the ability to take action to prevent what happened to my husband.

And what about preparation for the families? Living in these undercover situations radically changes the family's lifestyle and impacts the entire extended family. Yet the spouse and family usually receive only the barest of orientations, if any. There is no briefing on the lifestyle changes or how it will impact the lives of all family members. And then, where does the family turn when they have

a desperate need for help? There's no outreach, no preparation. All the spouse knows to do is maintain silence and anonymity; talk to no one; reach out to no one. Until...it's too late.

WORKING CONDITIONS

The work environment is key to a positive and productive work force. We lived in a fishbowl, yet were totally isolated, answering to two different supervisors that didn't know what the other was doing. The Bureau has an SOP for everything – how to handle the agency's "valuable resources" – cars, weapons and ammo, beepers, cell phones, etc. – to ensure that they are not abused; but, what about the most vital and precious resource of all – the officers and agents themselves? It often seems that they are the most expendable and least worthy of needed attention. Most officers perceive the enemy to be within...not the streets.

Every time I hear Jay Leno, I think of his Frito Lays commercial from a few years ago: "Go ahead. Eat 'em. We'll make more." We chew up our officers and spit them out – then, just hire more.

EAP, PEER SUPPORT, AND CHAPLAINCY PROGRAMS

Chaplain Programs can be a viable part of EAP. Most people respond well to faith-based counseling and this resource is invaluable. Chaplains, however, need training to understand the psychological needs of law enforcement. They should ride along with officers and get to know them. Then the officers will feel more comfortable to open up and talk.

An Employee Assistance Program – EAP – is an excellent start in offering peer services for the officers/agents and support staff; however, there is an inherent ethical danger if your EAP consists only of peer counselors. What about confidentiality issues for "sworn" peer counselors? It can't really be. And "confidentiality" certainly isn't the same as "privileged" information that a licensed professional would have. The agents and officers know this. They must not fear repercussions or retribution, or they will not risk asking for help. Therefore, the EAP staff should have full-time trained clinicians – psychological counselors, outside contractors – as well. Anonymity and complete confidentiality are key. Plus, these clinicians should get to know the cops; ride along; come to roll call; just get to know the cop mentality. You know, I read a treatise by Dr. Wayne Hill (it's on the RCPI webpage) discussing how cops choose to be victimized every day by the work we do. We choose to put ourselves in harm's way and to face the trauma of police work every day. He says...

One way to define a victim is one who experiences violence or the effect of violence and if that is an acceptable definition, police officers certainly qualify and re-qualify, sometimes day after day. It is important to give them that consideration and realize that they are willfully exposing themselves to violence on behalf of society for all of the obvious reasons. If we as a society ever forget that the people who police our communities are also citizens of the community, then we condemn them to a life of isolation, shrouded in bitterness and the pain of dehumanization....Policing is an occupation in which, with the passage of time, incident by incident, most officers become conditioned to be less and less familiar with their personal feelings. It is an occupation which promotes a process of emotional isolation or callousness, until officers finally loose touch with the effective or emotional side of their selves.

I met with Louis Freeh after Bruce died to discuss these issues. He agreed with much of what I had to say, but then he said that he could not allow counseling for his agents by outside psychiatrists or psychologists because he must "know everything" – know what is going on at all times. He could not allow his Special Agents to talk to external people...Thus, he would know nothing. They will

bottle it up inside and merely keep going until they can't go any further. Then they will give up and die. There was no one for us. Throughout Bruce's last three weeks I tried to get him to seek some kind of help and failed. I watched him deteriorate and felt totally helpless and terrified.

Did you know that 1/3 of active-duty and retired officers suffer from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and don't even know it? Obviously, they therefore don't get help. If there's no EAP, Peer Support, or counseling, where do they turn?

“Go ahead, eat ‘em. We'll make more.....”

MARKETING

Marketing of these programs – to both the officers and their families – is key. I didn't have a clue where to turn for help; and, I'm fairly knowledgeable, having been a cop and a fed. But, since my husband was undercover foreign counterintelligence, none of these services were available for us. We lived in isolation.

You have a chance... Keep the issue on the forefront for officers and their families – letters, articles in your department newsletter, frequent training. Remember, spouses often feel alone and helpless. And, they live with that feeling every day after the suicide of their loved one; it's devastating. I feel so responsible; yet, to this day I do not know how I could have prevented Bruce's death. I was right there with him and couldn't stop it. I needed help!! There was none.

FUNERALS/MEMORIAL SERVICES

I am fortunate to be able to tell you that my husband received full honors from the Bureau and from the Tallahassee Police Department, who still considers us two of their own. Memorial services were held both in Washington, DC, and in Tallahassee. Director Freeh spoke at the FBI memorial service and praised Bruce's dedication and commitment to his country. I was given a memorial box that honors him. The Bureau sent the Director of National Security to speak at Bruce's service in Tallahassee where the TPD Honor Guard stood at attention while Chief Walter McNeil and fellow officers praised my husband's career and life in Florida. The Marines played taps and presented an American flag to me. Do you honor all fallen officers in your department? They should be honored for how they lived, not how they died.

SURVIVORS

Do you keep in touch with survivors? Is this enough? Where is the support? When an officer dies, he kills a part of you, the survivor..... As a survivor you just want to “cease to be.” It is critical to reach out to the family members when a suicide occurs. Treat them with dignity and show them you care. It's tough.....It forces agents and officers to think of their own vulnerability. I could be their spouse, their loved one.....

Support groups such as COPS (Concerns Of Police Survivors) offer nothing for survivors of law enforcement suicide. Our loved ones are not recognized at the National Law Enforcement Memorial in Washington, DC. Much attention and services are given to the families of officers killed in-the-line-of-duty. Suicide survivors, however, are on their own – grieving while feeling isolated and abandoned from their police family. My husband was killed in-the-line-of-duty; everything about his death was job related. But, he is not recognized. His name is not on the wall.

Did you know that suicide survivors are not eligible for Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB)? There is no support – neither financial nor emotional. The guilt is incredible; the sense of loss is

overwhelming – emptiness and a sense of responsibility that somehow I should have done something to prevent this from happening. If no one reaches out to the survivors, how are we to know where to turn? We are victims ourselves. We are made to feel ashamed. There is no help; there is nowhere to turn.

I applied for Workman’s Comp as I felt the Bureau must be held accountable for Bruce’s death. It took 3 years, yet the DOL said it was their most compelling case for a suicide being job-related. They felt that they had no choice but to honor my application.

There is a non-profit effort, entitled SOLES (Survivors of Law Enforcement Suicide), directed by Teresa Tate, that is a resource to you. SOLES receives no financial support, though it should be given, so that this program can have a greater ability to reach out to victims and turn them into survivors. Every year SOLES displays handmade quilts on the steps of the capitol in DC; each square is made by a survivor; squares that represent more than 200 officers lost to suicide – 36 local, state, and federal agencies. My husband’s square is there. We’re both survivors.

RESEARCH

Research needs to be done to document law enforcement suicide and to study this heinous problem that robs us of our Finest. Research within law enforcement agencies, looking at policies and procedures, with the officers and agents themselves, and with the survivors. Dr. John Violanti, Police Suicide: Epidemic in Blue, a veteran, retired police officer, now academic researcher in Buffalo, NY, is one of the few.

CLOSURE

Bruce was just a regular guy. He was like many of you – a practical joker, loved to laugh, and enjoyed life to its fullest. He was the official roaster for his squad’s farewell dinners for transfers and retirements, an avid fisherman and hunter. Every summer we met life-long friends in the Florida Keys for lobstering. (I scattered his ashes in the Gulf over a lobster hole – this is where he was the happiest.) He was a natural athlete – baseball, softball, flag football, tennis, skiing, running – he excelled at it all. He won gold medals in the Police Olympics for the Pentathlon and Relay Race. He played baseball with a broken foot in DC because he couldn’t let his team down. He loved FSU football and Charlie Ward, ‘95 Heisman trophy winner. At his memorial service, even my Gator son said “Go Noles!” in his honor. Bruce was talented at working with his hands. He could work magic on a piece of wood with a saw and sander. He could do anything from making or refinishing furniture to building a house. He was always helping our friends and fellow officers with their projects.

He was like many of you – driven personality, unable to show his emotions, he had to appear unshakable, strong, and independent. He was my rock. With cops, there’s always a wall, even with family members, even when we were both cops. In other words, he had to be no less than perfect. These are admirable qualities in a person and desirable qualities we want in our law enforcement. We want strong, motivated, and independent personnel who can take charge of any given situation. However, these qualities come with a price. We must change the perception in our law enforcement institutions that you “suck it up and go on.” We need to be there for our own.....Certainly, no one else will be.

I share these comments with you in this article out of respect and concern. I work with law enforcement every day. I’m part of the criminal justice system and care deeply for all of us who dedicate our lives to its mission. These are critical issues that have been identified that can impact

the rate of suicides among law enforcement officers and agents. If we are willing to recognize the issues, deal with the stigma, offer the programs and training that are vital, perhaps we can call a halt to these losses of more than just a few good men. These deaths are happening with far too great a frequency.

An act such as the death of my husband should not have to happen. It is a terrible waste and an awesome loss not only to me and my sons, but to law enforcement and the communities we serve as well. Bruce was a good agent, a good husband, father, and son; and, most of all, he was a good man. We must do everything possible to ensure that these losses do not continue to happen!!

Donna G. Schulz, Law Enforcement Coordination Manager, U.S. Attorney's Office—Middle District of Florida, 400 North Tampa Street, Suite 3200, Tampa, Florida 33602; Phone: 813-274-6092; Fax: 813-274-6300; Email: donna.schulz@usdoj.gov.