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FEATURED

## "Suicide: The Ripple Effect": North Alabama mother brings film with a message of hope and help to Decatur

By Catherine Godbey Staff Writer Oct 28, 2018 Updated Oct 28, 2018



Wendy Galloway, right, organized a screening of "Suicide: The Ripple Effect" in memory and honor of her son, Aaron Alexar Gorklo, who died July 2016. [COURTESY PHOTO]

Courtesy photo

The steel dog tags engraved with Aaron Alexander Gorklo's name hung loosely around Wendy Galloway's neck. She has worn the badges given to her son, a member of the Alabama Army National Guard, since his death by suicide in July 2016. He was 19.

“People don’t want to talk to me about Aaron. They don’t say his name. I want to talk about him. I want to hear his name. I’m not ashamed of Aaron. How he died didn’t make him who he was. How he lived was important. He loved military history, he loved art, he loved his family. I’m not going to stop talking about him or pretend he never lived. His life mattered,” said Galloway, who lives in Madison.

To spur the conversation about Gorklo’s life and death, Galloway champions events that raise awareness of suicide and mental health outreach. On Nov. 6, Galloway will bring the film “Suicide: The Ripple Effect” to Decatur’s AMC Classic. The first screening she arranged, held April 10 in Huntsville, played to a sellout crowd.

The documentary film tells the story of Kevin Hines, who, 18 years ago at the age of 19, attempted to commit suicide by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge. He survived and became a mental health advocate.

“Kevin has bipolar disorder. His message is about hope, how to live with a mental illness, where to seek help and that each life matters. When I saw the trailer for this movie, I knew I could use this to honor Aaron,” Galloway said.

Reminders of Gorklo appear everywhere — in the dog tags Galloway wears, the red, white and blue band circling her left wrist, the memorial decal on her car and the T-shirts with the sayings “You Matter” and “It’s OK Not to be OK.”

“People need to start talking and sharing. As a mother, I don’t want any other mother to go through that feeling. Sadly, it is happening every day.”

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 45,000 Americans die by suicide every year. Each suicide impacts at least 115 people.

July 10, 2016, was a Sunday. Gorklo, who joined the National Guard six months after graduating from Sparkman High School, returned from a weekend of training. Gorklo, who volunteered at the U.S. Veterans Memorial Museum in Huntsville, talked to his mother about going active. But underlying that excitement were feelings of uncertainty, stress and sadness, Galloway said.

“Aaron was diagnosed with Asperger’s at 12. One of the ways it appeared in him is once he got hold of an idea, that’s all he would focus on. As happy as he was, he was upset about family stuff. There were financial troubles, we had just lost the car in a wreck and he wasn’t sure what to do next, whether to go to school or not,” Galloway said.

After talking about his future in the military, Gorklo started discussing politics. Galloway, trying to get ready for work the next day, half-listened.

“He said, ‘If you’re not going to listen to me, I’m going to go to bed.’ Then he told me he loved me,” Galloway said. “I knew I needed to go and rub his head and tell him everything was going to be OK. Or have him sit next to me. But I just waited too long. I didn’t do any of those things because I was tired. Thirty minutes later, I heard a boom. I knew right away he was gone. I didn’t even get to hold him.”

Galloway started attending a support group for suicide survivors organized by the Crisis Services of North Alabama, founded Aaron’s Amazing Soldiers and searched for ways to honor her son, including screening “Suicide: The Ripple Effect.”

With the encouragement of Connie Kane, crisis counseling program manager for the Crisis Services of North Alabama, Galloway spearheaded the effort to bring the film to Decatur. Other organizations supporting the screening include Hospice of the Valley, the Mental Health Association in Morgan County, Bearded Warriors, NAMI in Huntsville and EMDR therapists.

“When Aaron was little, he said he wished he was a robot so he didn’t have to feel. He also, rarely, but at times, would say he wished he wasn’t here. He only said it when he was upset, so I didn’t think he really meant it. I wish I had reached out for help,” Galloway said.

The organizations will have tables set up at the theater the day of the film for individuals seeking help.

Tickets are available online only and cost \$12. [gathr.us/screening/24060](https://gathr.us/screening/24060).

“I will stop talking about suicide once it ceases to exist. If you have thoughts of suicide, if you are struggling with a mental illness, do not be ashamed. There is hope. There is help,” Galloway said.

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