

"If you can give someone a spark of hope, that's enough to get them through."

— Stephen Johnson

WITH HELP COMES HOPE

In suicide prevention, every life saved is a triumph.

by **SUSAN C. SCHUYLER**
CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

In Wisconsin, you are three times more likely to die by your own hand than you are to be murdered.

This is just one suicide statistic gleaned from among hundreds listed on the Mental Health America of Wisconsin Web page—all of them just as alarming. Stephen Johnson and Dave Clements have a particular interest in those numbers—and in changing them, through two different efforts.

Johnson is on the front lines, fighting to lower the numbers of completed suicides as a clinical therapist for La Crosse County Human Services' crisis program. He and 15 colleagues respond to more than 5,000 calls a year, 24 hours a day.

For Clements, of La Crosse, suicide has only one face—that of his son, Joe.

A life of crisis

Johnson leans back in his chair in his small-but-tidy office as he calmly ticks through the events of his day so far. The last item he mentions is fielding a call from a boy who is hiding guns at his home because he is worried his dad is going to kill himself. "That's just before-lunch stuff," he says.

Johnson's light tone momentarily belies the weight of what he admits is very challenging work. However, it's work he chooses over counseling in long-term mental health, where he started his career 20 years ago. "You can help somebody in an hour, and it's kind of gratifying in that way," he says.

Johnson describes the impulse to commit suicide as a point in time, like a temporary window he uses his training and skill to close

behind those who come to him in crisis. It sounds so simple. "If you can give someone a spark of hope, that's enough to get them through," he says.

It's normal for people to consider suicide. And unlike homicide, suicide has no geographical, racial or cultural boundaries. We are all potential victims. "I think most human beings, at some point in their lives, have the thought cross their minds," Johnson says.

Three core elements may turn an attempted suicide into a completed suicide, according to Johnson: "They are thinking about suicide, they have a plan to follow through on it, and they have an intention to act on that plan." There are other risk factors: Up to 90 percent of suicides are associated with a mental health or substance abuse disorder, according to Mental Health America.

However, most of those who commit suicide never give professionals like Johnson the chance to help. The most common link to completed suicides is untreated depression. Johnson says that in about 80 percent of those cases, the victims haven't had any contact with mental health providers.

So it's up to the rest of us who live and work closely with those considering suicide to notice the signs and symptoms. One method to help identify these critical suicide-warning signs is QPR, an acronym for *question, persuade and refer*. This lifesaving three-step process, which Johnson calls the "gold standard," was the subject of suicide prevention expert Dr. Paul Quinnett's presentation at the 2009 Suicide Prevention Summit held Sept. 16, hosted by the La Crosse Area Suicide Prevention Initiative. Among the major sponsors for the event was the Joe Was Just Joe Foundation, which

Clements founded in honor of his son, Joe. For him, it's personal.

A life in crisis

The foundation was born just hours after Joe died on March 10, 2008, a few months shy of his 20th birthday. The next afternoon, Clements and his wife, Carlynn, stood in the kitchen trying to make sense out of the emotional fallout from their son's suicide. "Joe was just Joe," Carlynn said at that moment. The foundation instantly had a name, and Clements quickly named its mission: suicide prevention. "We weren't going to let his passing be a total loss. Something positive had to come out of something so tragic, so terrible and so painful," he says.

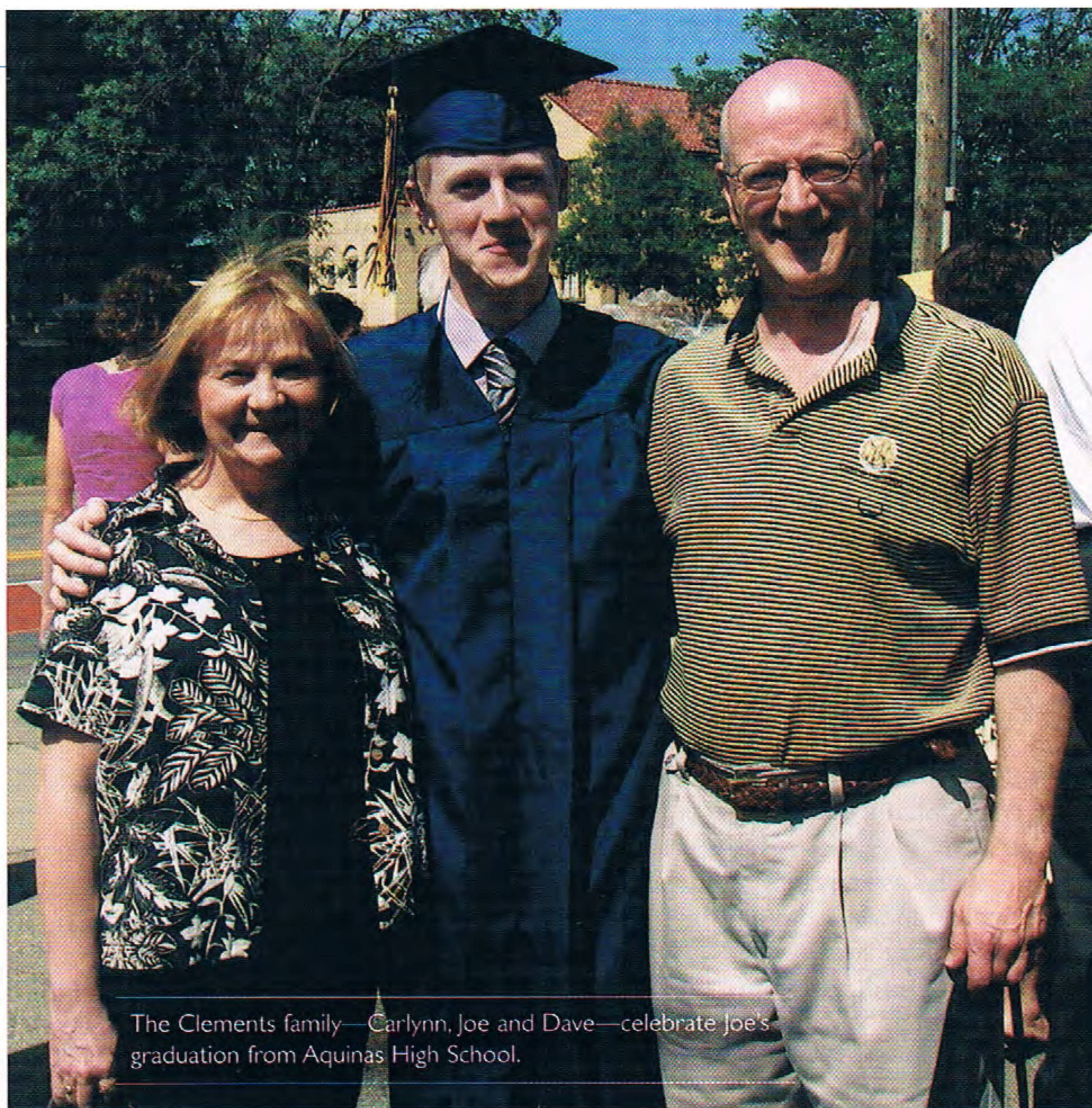
Clements brings Joe back to life as he shares details of his son's brief time with him: the chase and flashlight-tag games Joe played with neighborhood kids, Joe's talent with all things computer, and Joe's deep and lasting friendships with classmates from Cathedral School and Aquinas Middle and High School.

Then, Clements describes Joe's struggle with depression, and he struggles to keep his composure. "I don't know how we lost him," he says. Joe was seeing a counselor and taking medication for depression, which at one point he stopped taking on his own, even though Clements pleaded with him to continue. Clements feels especially passionate about raising awareness about depression and ensuring that those suffering from it find help.

Healing is slow for Clements, his wife and his daughter, Sarah. "It's always an open sore," he says. The CD Joe burned for his dad of his favorite music and the one that was in the CD player the day Joe died are too difficult to listen to, in spite of the passion for music father and son shared. And the work of the foundation and its Web site comes in spurts as the family tries to find the emotional resources to confront the memories they cultivate.

That's to be expected, according to Johnson. "It's like any death, only it's worse because it could have been an avoidable death. There's nothing soothing you can say," he says.

Clements did take comfort in the words of



The Clements family—Carlynn, Joe and Dave—celebrate Joe's graduation from Aquinas High School.

a fellow Rotarian, who said the pain will never be any less, it will just come less often. In the meantime, Clements finds peace in evidence that Joe is still present, in memories and in his own determination to help others. ♣

Susan C. Schuyler is a UW-L Communication Studies instructor for whom this story brought renewed respect and compassion for all of those who endure the horrors of suicide.

CALL FOR HELP

Call the 24-hour La Crosse County Human Services Crisis Line **(608-784-HELP)** if you notice a loved one is

- threatening to hurt or kill himself or talking about wanting to hurt or kill himself
- looking for ways to kill herself by seeking access to firearms, pills or other means
- talking or writing about death, dying or suicide
- feeling hopeless
- feeling rage or uncontrolled anger or seeking revenge
- acting reckless or engaging in risky activities, seemingly without thinking
- feeling trapped, like there's no way out
- increasing alcohol or drug use
- withdrawing from friends, family and society
- feeling anxious or agitated, unable to sleep or sleeping all the time
- experiencing dramatic mood changes
- seeing no reason for living or having no sense of purpose in life

Adapted from "Suicide Warning Signs" from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Visit www.lacrossesuicideprevention.org/info.htm for local suicide prevention resources, and www.joewasjustjoe.com for more information on the Joe Was Just Joe Foundation.