

A Party Born From Sorrow

Two Friends Who Lost Fathers to Suicide Host Annual Fundraiser for Prevention, Awareness

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"Won't it be odd to be happy, like we always thought we're supposed to feel, but never seem to be?"

-- From Barenaked Ladies' "War on Drugs," words and music by Steven Page and Ed Robertson.

Steven Page of the Toronto-based rock band Barenaked Ladies is planning to do his part to help those in desperate need of some happiness when he headlines the third annual Party for Life on Wednesday night at Clarendon Grill in Arlington.

Page is scheduled to play an acoustic set of Barenaked Ladies songs and new solo material at the charity event, which benefits the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and the National Mental Health Association.

Party for Life is the creation of two Northern Virginia women, Connie E. Belsito and Kim S. Larkin, friends who lost their fathers to suicide. In 2002, Larkin and Belsito were among "a group of people sitting over at my house having some wine, talking about our interest in volunteering," said Belsito, 37, of Sterling. "As the conversation continued, it came out that all of us basically had been affected by, or had suffered ourselves from, depression and mental illness."



Party for Life organizers Connie E. Belsito, left, and Kim S. Larkin, shown with pictures of their fathers.
(Rafael Crisostomo For The Washington Post)

Particularly regarding the issue of suicide, "we thought, there is really nothing out there. People don't talk about this," Belsito continued. "I'd known these people for many years and had no idea we had so much in common. As we got to talking, we thought, rather than joining [an existing charity], why not do something ourselves to make a difference?"

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The two women began contacting members of the local business community, Belsito said, and found that people were "extremely open" to donating time and resources toward an event to raise money and awareness to combat depression and suicide.

Page said that it was an easy decision for him when the Party for Life organizers approached him about playing at this year's affair. A self-described "survivor of depression," Page said, "People don't want to admit that they feel these things, but they are incredibly common."

The Barenaked Ladies song "War on Drugs," from the band's 2003 album "Everything to Everyone," was inspired by the Toronto City Council's efforts to reduce the high number of suicide jumpers from the city's Prince Edward Viaduct (also known as the Bloor Street viaduct), Page said. Last year, the city government spent \$6 million Canadian to build a suicide barrier called the "Luminous Veil" around the bridge.

Page, whose cousin jumped off the viaduct, called the Luminous Veil "a grand monument to suicide. And a very tragic monument it is." He said "War on Drugs" has gotten a stronger response from fans than any song he has written. "It reminded me how pervasive mental illness and depression are," he said. "We have to remove some of the stigma from mental illness, and that's what I think Party for Life's main ambition is."

Larkin, 36, of Burke, said suicide is the 11th leading cause of death in the United States and the second leading cause of death among high school and college-age students. The leading contributor to suicide, she said, is clinical depression. The National Mental Health Association estimates that clinical depression affects 19 million Americans a year.

"As Connie and I both know," said Larkin, suicide "leaves survivors feeling a lot of guilt, a lot of devastation, a lot of 'what ifs' that never really go away."

Larkin was in her early twenties and a student at George Mason University in Fairfax when her father, Wayne Willard, fatally shot himself during a battle with depression.

"Looking back now, my sister and mother and I realize this was something that probably had been going on for a long time," Larkin said. "He was just becoming increasingly unhappy in everything that was going on in his life. We certainly didn't know that he was clinically depressed." After her father's death, Larkin's first call was to friend and fellow GMU student Belsito.

Frank Belsito, Connie's father, died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound when she was a child. "It was the late 1960s . . . and he was suffering from depression," Belsito said. "He

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was in and out of sanitariums. He was [in] one of the first electroshock therapy test beds as well as [on] a lot of medication. It was just making it a lot worse. He would just disappear for days at a time, and no one would know where he was.

"My mom didn't really know how to deal with it. It wasn't something that people talked about. She thought she was doing the best thing as far as getting him treatment . . . but it wasn't the right treatment," Belsito said. "I think now, some 35 years later, people are seeing that there are so many avenues of treatment, and one of them is just talking to people who care about you."

Larkin said that all of the money that Party for Life raises each year goes directly to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and the National Mental Health Association. She describes the foundation as "the leading organization providing research and awareness for suicide prevention efforts across the United States."

"They are working on setting up an affiliate here, so a large part of our funding is going toward awareness here to help them do that," Larkin said. "We are definitely their largest [contributor] in this region. They have a large focus on [support for] suicide survivors, as well as prevention of suicide."

The National Mental Health Association, Larkin said, provides "direct access and resources for people that need assistance. They partner with a lot of organizations that are doing various things to help folks prevent depression, as well as treat folks that are going through circumstances."

Belsito said those who attend the fundraiser will have an opportunity to meet New York filmmaker Dempsey Rice, who will show clips from her documentary "Daughter of Suicide," which was broadcast on HBO in 2000.

The party also will feature food from the Clarendon Grill, a silent auction and a raffle that will include Washington Redskins [tickets](#), rounds of golf, hotel stays, restaurant [gift certificates](#) and spa treatments made possible by private donations and sponsorships.

"We make it really fun," Belsito said.

Tickets for Party for Life are \$60 each and are limited to the first 350 people. For more information, visit www.partyforlife.com.

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