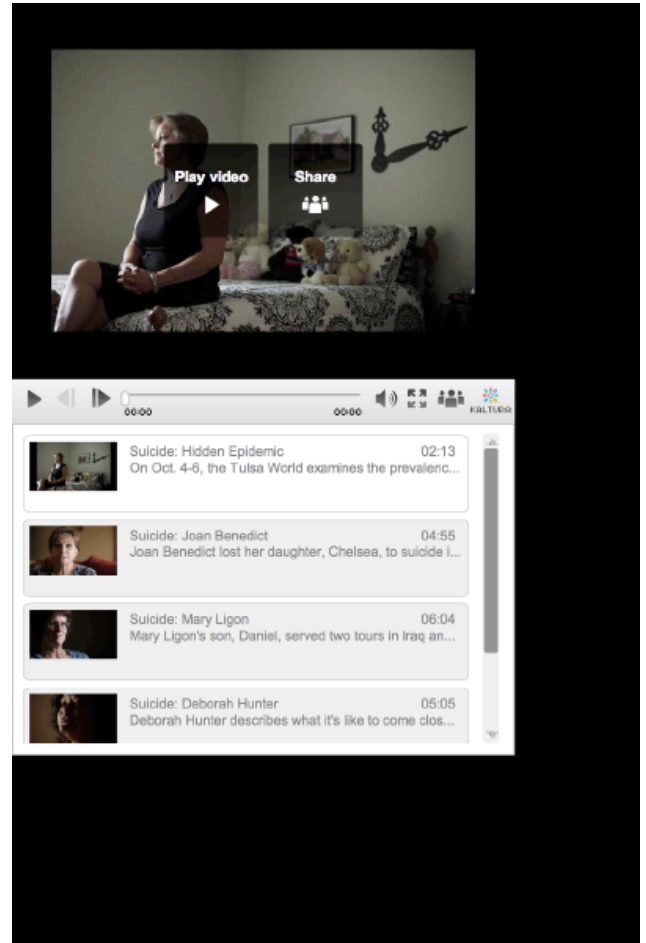




Michele Magalassi pins a ribbon on her husband Billy prior to the teen suicide awareness walk at Camp Loughridge on Sept. 13, 2009, their son Brandon killed himself when he was 14 years old. Photos by JAMES GIBBARD/Tulsa World



## ANYONE'S CHILD

### Parents fight to understand after son's suicide

By Omer Gillham  
World Staff Writer

Five years after facing the suicide of a teenage son, Billy and Michele Magalassi know there is life after suicide.

The couple lost their son Brandon in June 2004 to a self-inflicted wound.

Brandon was a 14-year-old student from Owasso. He killed himself with a pistol on the last day of classes after being sent home for misbehaving. Before their son took his life, the Magalassis were unaware of the warning signs of suicide, Billy Magalassi said.

"You assume that people who commit suicide are on drugs or homeless," he said. "But it happens in families like yours and mine. We thought we could not be that family with a suicide, but we are that family. It could happen to anyone."

Since their son's death, the Magalassis have become educated about suicide and its startling statistics. Last year, 578 people killed themselves in Oklahoma. That's a 12 percent increase compared to five years ago.

In Tulsa County, 119 people killed themselves last year, a 13 percent increase over 2007, state Medical Examiner records show.

In 2007, the latest detail of demographics, five teens between 11 years old and 15 years old committed suicide by hanging themselves or with drugs, Medical Examiner records show.

Suicide touches millions of people. Over the course of a lifetime, 80 percent of Americans will know someone who dies by suicide and 20 percent will experience a suicide by a close family member, said the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

Suicide usually affects the family in one of two ways, according to people interviewed by the Tulsa World. Most families avoid talking about it, wrapping it in secrets. Only a few, such as the

#### Wringing good from the bad

Suicide affects hundreds of families across Oklahoma each year who must live with the stigma of having family members who ended their own lives.

During the past five years in Oklahoma, there have been 2,711 suicides — more people than make up the individual populations of 476 of the state's towns, according to U.S. Census data.

For today's stories, the Tulsa World interviewed a suicide survivor, Deborah Hunter, and the Magalassi family, who were affected by the death of their 14-year-old son. The stories show that there is life after suicide, and that families can break the silence and stigma of suicidal actions. Some families and individuals realize they can use their experiences to help others and to curb the number of suicides that occur each year in Oklahoma.

### Stories



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Suicide victims don't just hurt themselves

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Magalassis, talk about it and help others avoid such a tragedy.



Suicide can bring shame and a stigma to families, which makes it difficult to reach out for help, said Mike Brose, executive director of the Mental Health Association in Tulsa.

As part of their life after suicide, the Magalassis chose to get active. Their decision to dedicate their time and attention to suicide awareness, primarily among teenagers, was born at the hospital where Brandon died a few days after he shot himself.

"At the hospital, we made the decision to make something positive come out of this," Michele Magalassi said. "Our faith, our church and our friends have been marvelous support for us."

Courtesy photo of Brandon Magalassi.

The couple donated their son's organs to help individuals suffering from various diseases. Fighting through their pain, they established a memorial fund for Brandon which has raised \$35,000 to help pay for the college education of several Owasso students, said Billy Magalassi.

The Magalassis have a second son, Justin, a college student who is also involved in suicide awareness. He is a premedical student at Oklahoma State University, Michele Magalassi said.

Each year the Magalassis open up their home to Owasso students who want to assemble ribbons for suicide awareness. Students have put together as many as 2,000 ribbons as part of National Suicide Prevention Week.

"The kids are just wonderful," Michele Magalassi said. "They want to do all they can to help and to raise awareness."

Most recently, the couple participated in the SafeTeam walk, an anniversary walk celebrating 10 years of teen suicide prevention.

While the Magalassis have moved beyond some of the effects of a suicide, they can still remember the grief associated with losing one of their sons.



Billy and Michele Magalassi (center) walk along a trail with dozens of other people during SafeTeam walk.

"You think it is a bad dream, but you wake up and it's real," said Michele Magalassi, 45, a Bank of Oklahoma vice president. "It was just so sad, and you cannot imagine the pain and shock of this happening to one of your children."

Billy Magalassi, 45, a federal agent with the Justice Department, said: "You can't describe the effect it has on you to someone else. The pain in your gut is unreal."

Five years later, the room in which Brandon shot himself still gives the Magalassis a reason to pause, Michele Magalassi said.

"The hurt never goes away completely, but it eases," she said. "It is hard to walk past the room. He was a great kid, and we miss him."

Before his death, Brandon had many of the symptoms of a person who could be a potential suicide. He was lethargic and less affectionate with his parents. As his 15th birthday neared, he seemed uninterested in celebrating. However, his symptoms were obscured by the fact that the Magalassis thought they were dealing with typical teenage behavior.

"He was a good student and an athlete so we thought that might be the cause of his tiredness," Billy Magalassi said.

On the day that Brandon killed himself, he had been sent home from school along with other classmates for drawing pictures or writing inappropriate comments in a classmate's yearbook, Michele Magalassi said. Several boys were sent home, she said.

"When I think about it, I wonder why we made such a big deal about it," Michele Magalassi said. In a suicide note left in his shoe, Brandon apologized for writing a comment in the yearbook and mentioned the emotional pain of his life.

By being open about their experiences with suicide, the Magalassis have attracted many people. "It is amazing to me how many people have come up to us and said, '(A family member) committed suicide,'" Billy Magalassi said. "Our pastor said this would happen, and he was right."

The Magalassis are members of the First United Methodist Church of Owasso. In addition to spiritual help, the couple sought counseling and attended a

### Crisis and Suicide Help Line and Resources

- In a crisis situation, call 911
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 800-273-TALK (8255). Veterans can also use this help line.
- Tulsa Veterans Affairs Outpatient Clinic: 628-2500 and ask for a suicide prevention coordinator
- COPEs Tulsa: 744-4800
- Tulsa Helpline: Dial 211
- Mental Health Association of Tulsa: 585-1213
- Stop a Suicide Today: at [www.stopasuicide.org](http://www.stopasuicide.org)
- Columbia University TeenScreen Program: [www.teenscreen.org](http://www.teenscreen.org)



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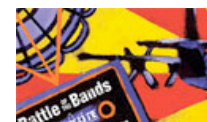
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Crime on Campus



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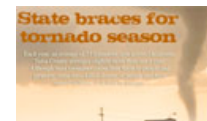
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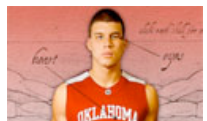
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Anatomy of a winner



support group for families of suicide victims. The counseling helped them address guilt and self-doubt, Michele Magalassi said.

With a greater understanding of the causes of suicide, the Magalassis have concluded that Brandon probably suffered from depression.

"Brandon is in heaven," Michele Magalassi said. "We'll see him again."

The Magalassis said they have experienced numerous moments of the Holy Spirit since their son's death. One event occurred soon after Brandon died. Michele Magalassi said she had a heavy heart as she went to bed, knowing Brandon was gone.

But at some point during the night, Brandon appeared to her in a dream. He said: " 'Mom. Don't worry about me. I'm fine.' That brought me peace," she said.

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- For local information on teen programs: call the Mental Health Association in Tulsa at 585-1213.
- Also: Contact the Mental Health Association in Tulsa or COPES to learn about Question, Persuade and Refer training. This free training will help family members or individuals ask key questions that might determine if someone is suicidal and to assist the person to find help.



Signing Day 2009



Inauguration 2009



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Will Rogers



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Back into a corner



Lost Lives: A Decade of Tulsa Homicides



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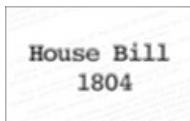
Oral Roberts: The Man. The Mission. The Ministry.



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