



My Red Said

THE CONVERSATION STARTS HERE

Barrington resident Jessica Hutchison wants us to talk to each other, and perhaps more important than that—to listen to each other. As a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor, she not only has the training and skills to help us along, but she also has some serious personal experience in an area that is important to our community. It is so important, she says, that she has created an awareness campaign here in Barrington to get us talking about it. The topic? Suicide. There. We said it.

Hutchison and a group of mental health organizations, media companies, and community members are supporting this campaign which is called “My Red Said”. She has created red ribbons to share and encourages others to put red ribbons where people can see them. The campaign is a way to let people in the community know that they are not alone in their grief, pain, and loneliness. She invited Quintessential Barrington to learn more.



My Red Said

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Did you grow up in Barrington?

No, I did not. I moved to Chicago a year after graduating college, in 2006. I studied abroad in London during my Junior year of college. After that, I knew I belonged in a big city. I spent eight years in the city before moving to Barrington in 2014.

What compelled you to go into the counseling profession?

My career began in corporate America in the sales/marketing world. After leaving a meeting one-day, I called my boss to express my excitement over a meeting that I felt went well. “What did you sell?” he asked. “Well, nothing” was my reply. I then went on to tell him about the meeting. My joy did not come from anything I sold; it came from the honesty and vulnerability of the client when she told me about her life struggles. I offered her an ear to listen and provided input that gave her hope. In that instant I realized I needed to make a career change.

You lost your father to suicide when you were newly married. Are you comfortable talking about it?

Yes. My story is a big part of the work I do today.

Did you have any idea or indications that he would chose this path? Could you have stopped him if you knew?

This is a tough one. I have learned that hindsight truly is 20/20, which makes for a difficult journey following a loss by suicide. In the aftermath of my Dad’s passing, I was overcome with guilt, as I did believe that I could have prevented his suicide.

Here is the difficult part about “signs”. They are not always as apparent as one might assume. Looking back at the months leading up to his death, every single sign was present. It is easy to see the signs when you know how the story ends. I don’t know if there is anything that we could have done. Could we have done something different? Absolutely. There are a hundred things I could have done differently, but I don’t know if that would have changed the outcome.

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How did your Father’s sudden passing affect you?

There is not an area of my life that was not impacted by my Father’s suicide. It changed everything I knew to be true about myself, and the world around me. I was six months post graduate school and lost every bit of confidence in my ability to help those who are struggling. How can I help others when I could not even help my own Father? I looked in the mirror and no longer recognized myself. I walked outside and suddenly the world looked scarier than it ever did before. I have

known and felt pain, but this pain was different. This pain rocked me to my core.

You’ve mentioned that your grief level was not a storm, but rather a tsunami. What was your grief journey like?

There is little to prepare you for this type of loss. We are taught little about grief, both inside and outside of a classroom. At that time, I had only lost grandparents. It was sad, but it was also the circle of life that we have talked about since we were kids. Getting old and dying makes sense. This type of loss makes zero sense. It is difficult to talk about this type of loss. When you tell someone, you lost your father to suicide, you are met time and time again with the same ‘deer-in-the-headlights’ look. You end up comforting others more than they comfort you.

Suicide carries a stigma that immediately puts you on defense. People make assumptions and you feel their judgement. In addition to comforting others, you feel compelled to defend the character of the person you lost. I did not want my Father to be remembered for his final moment, but the life he lived prior. It was exhausting. Eventually, I just stopped talking about it.

I isolated more and more because of the exhaustion that accompanies trying to pretend you are doing better than you are. I found myself in a not-so-great place and blamed anything and everything for my pain. It was a lonely place to be. The world certainly wasn’t going to change, and I didn’t want to live this way. So slowly I began to rebuild my world. I began looking at my pain as a place to learn, grow, and heal. I made friends



of activation during puberty. This makes impulse control even more difficult, which can lead to our youth making decisions that are often a result of a particular feeling in the moment versus a long sought-out plan. While adult suicides can also be impulsive, neurologically speaking, there are definitive differences.

How did the loss of your father affect your marriage, and why?

Shortly after celebrating one year of marriage, my Father took his life. Through my own experience and working with couples in my clinical practice, I have found that husbands/men are problem solvers by nature. Hence, that might be why some are not inclined to sit and listen at length, and struggle to understand how women can spend hours talking over brunch. Men don't like to talk about problems, they like to solve them. When they can't solve problems, they often feel ineffective.

I have watched grief rip through marriages. Even the marriages with the strongest foundations are impacted by sudden/traumatic loss. My Father's suicide put substantial pressure on my young marriage. Being naturally independent, I struggled with asking for help. I believed I could deal with all the pain on my own, and when I couldn't, I started to question every decision I had ever made—my marriage being one of them. I can't speak to what held my marriage together in the aftermath of losing my Dad. Sometimes I think it was simply two stubborn people who never took failure lightly. We have a great deal of gratitude for the life we have, but that has not come without pain. We have learned that the bad times are what enable us to see the good.

What are the markers of someone who is experiencing hopelessness or having suicidal ideation?

As stated by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, "There is no single cause for suicide. Suicide most often occurs when stressors and health issues converge to create an experience of hopelessness and despair." Warning signs are often defined by talk, behavior, and mood. (You can learn more here: <https://afsp.org/risk-factors-and-warning-signs>.)

It seems that people don't like to have the difficult conversations, such as about suicide. And when they do try to reach out to someone that they think is clinically depressed, they go about it the wrong way.

with my pain and realized that running from it was harder than feeling it. It is amazing what we learn about ourselves when we lean into the pain. It was through this journey that I realized the importance of pain, and how terrible we are collectively as a society at not only talking about it, but feeling it. This is the foundation of the work I do in my practice. Sitting with others inside of their pain is humbling. I will forever be grateful that others allow me to sit with them during profound moments of vulnerability. It's a beautiful gift that came from my pain.

Do you think a person's age might indicate the possibility of a suicide?

Absolutely. Adolescent suicide is different than adult suicide. We know that the brain is not fully developed until our mid-20s, with some even arguing that it could be later. We also know that the prefrontal cortex is one of last areas to form. This part of our brain is responsible for things like impulse control, complex planning, decision making, etc. The prefrontal cortex is often referred to as "the logical" area of the brain. We also know the brain's reward system tends to reach a high level

What should we do if we sense someone is showing the markers of severe depression?

Our society is not great at having difficult conversations. We are taught to avoid pain. If we have a headache, we take an Advil. We are not good at being uncomfortable. Don't believe me? See how long you can sit in silence without speaking up to break it. This is an activity I often lead in trainings, and it is amazing how quickly someone breaks the silence. We are a society that loves silver-lining the heck out of things. Have you ever been told, "This too shall pass" or "You have so much to be grateful for?" While gratitude is essential, it should not be used in place of validation. When someone is in pain, they don't want someone to offer a silver lining. They want validation. They want someone to sit with them in their pain, not to try and talk them out of it. We are often afraid to lean into other's pain. Yet when we do, we give the other person the most beautiful gift: the gift of no longer sitting alone in it.

Hope comes from validation and empathy. Speaking from experience, I can tell you single handedly the one thing that led to my isolation was the silver linings. I didn't want someone to tell me, "This too shall pass." I wanted someone to sit with me and ask about my pain. I wanted to be understood. The best advice I can give to those reading this is, "Listen to understand." Ask questions. Lean in. Let them know that their pain is valid. Most importantly, remind them that they are not alone.

You are passionate about your campaign, "My Red Said". How did you arrive at the idea to do this?

There is an incredible amount of heart in this project. Over the past year, I have been consumed by the mental and emotional pain that is a direct result of the pandemic. I found myself heavily focused on the problem, which is never a good place for a highly emotional person who feels it all. If I didn't redirect my focus, the pain of it all was going to take me down.

My Red Said is my way of being part of the solution, rather than the problem. This project is about meeting people where they are. Whether you have overcome a struggle or continue to struggle, there is a place for you. The individualistic society that we have created did not act in our favor over this past year. My Red Said is about having difficult conversations and reminding

everyone that it truly does take a village. Humans are pack animals. We are meant to be connected to one another. What happens to the animal when they leave the pack? We need to come together to heal. And it all starts with conversation. My Red Said helps initiate those difficult conversations.

How would you like people to understand and support the "My Red Said" campaign?

You can support the campaign by sharing it on social media, telling your friends and family about it, and hanging your own ribbon in support. Ask your friends and family how they are doing and listen to understand. Let those around you know that it is OK to not be OK. What's not OK is silently suffering.

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What will the campaign look like, and how can people participate?

Ribbons will be made available at locations around town (Cook Street Coffee, Samaritan Counseling Center). You can also email me directly at JLHutchisonLCPC@gmail.com and I would be happy to provide ribbons. The goal is to have as many ribbons as possible hanging in businesses, neighborhoods, schools, etc. beginning the week of March 7. Each ribbon has a heart where messages can be written, should you choose. Visit my website, and click on My Red Said for prompts, or write your own message. The goal is to show others that they are not alone. My Red Said is a great way to begin dialogue. For example, My Red Said, "I have learned that asking for help is a sign of strength not weakness."

On your JLHutchison.com website, you offer information on the My Red Said campaign as well as places people can call for help. What other resources are available for people who know

they need help, or for their loved ones who are concerned about them?


On the campaign page is a running document with all mental health practices and practitioners in and around Barrington, who are accepting new patients currently. It has been a struggle for those seeking help to get help because of the pandemic. I wanted to make the process of getting help as easy as possible. There is also a QR code on each ribbon that individuals can scan, that will take them directly to the campaign page.

What are your hopes for the My Red Said effort?

I would love this campaign to go national. I would also love Barrington to be the community that ignites this movement. I want to eliminate the fear that comes with having difficult conversations. Individuals will often tell me that they are afraid to talk to their kids about suicide because, "I don't want them to think that is an option." Talking about suicide doesn't make it an option, but NOT talking about it does. We can't change that for which we do not talk about.

Is there anything else we should know about the topic of suicide and how we can help others who are suffering with depression or other mental health issues?

I think it is important to remind people to ask for what they want and need. Be specific. If you are seeking validation and support, tell people that. This is one of the skills I teach in my practice. Often, I hear people talk about feeling alone in their pain. When I ask them what they tell others, the answer is always the same; "I tell them I am fine." If we tell people we are fine, they will assume we are fine.

Vulnerability is essential and we are quick to dismiss its importance. We think that the people who love us know what we want and need. I can assure you, that they do not. We must be explicit when we are in need. If we are not, we end up developing false narratives that further drive isolation. Along the same line of listening to understand, we must speak to be understood. When we are brave enough to tell our story we often find that this world feels a lot less lonely. 

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