

By Kellie Hudson

Scott Chisholm remembers exactly where he was when he heard that his dad had taken his own life.

He was 16, shooting hoops in a school gym with his older brother when their teacher walked in.

“He had a really serious look on his face,” Chisholm recalls. “I thought we were in trouble. For what, I had no idea but we were typical teenage boys. We were always up to something.”

Instead of discipline for an innocent prank, Chisholm and his brother were told something that would change their lives forever.

Their father had committed suicide. Or died by suicide as Chisholm likes to differentiate.

“Commit makes it sound like a crime,” he says. “Suicide isn’t a crime. The stigma around it is.”

Scott has lived with that stigma his entire life.

He witnessed it in Marathon where he grew up. No one knew what to do after his father died - what to say, how to help. So, often, they did nothing. Others in the predominantly Catholic town saw it as a sin, so Chisholm felt judged. Subtly. Overtly.

He watched his family fall apart. In particular, he remembers his little sister’s reaction when they told her.

“She was a soft, sweet 11-year-old. Her face, the muscles in her face, she turned to stone. That moment changed her forever,” he remembers, pausing, his eyes filling with tears.

Chisholm still sees that stigma now, 27 years later, in people’s faces when he mentions how his dad died.

“Although I never hid the fact my father took his own life, I often felt that I was left dealing with my pain and recovery in solitude and loneliness,” the 44-year-old man says. “I don’t think anything has changed really. Today, as a firefighter responding to suicide calls, I see the same patterns of isolation and social stigma. People are still afraid to talk about it.”

That’s why he’s embarking upon a photographic journey, *Collateral Damage: Images of Those Left Behind by Suicide*, to tell his story and the stories of others whose lives have been impacted by suicide.

Chisholm, a Thunder Bay firefighter and professional photographer, will take the pictures himself.

“The idea of putting a face to the loved ones left behind by suicide has been with me for more than 10 years,” he says. “I passionately believe by stepping out of the dark to talk about this taboo subject, it will help others.”

Olympic champion swimmer Alex Baumann has agreed to be photographed and participate in the project.

Baumann was 16 when his older brother Roman jumped over Niagara Falls.

“I was at home when I found out, when the police called,” Baumann remembers. “It was very difficult. In a sense, unreal. Surely there’s been a mistake, they’ll find him, he’ll be alive. They never did find his body.”

To make matters worse, within hours of being told the news, a package arrived at the house for Alex. A birthday gift from his big brother, a pen and pencil set.

The card read: “Best of luck with your swimming.” Four years later, Alex went on to win two gold medals in world record time at the Summer Olympics in Los Angeles.

“My mother never recovered from it,” Baumann says. “My dad was more stoic, kept it inside, felt he had to be strong as the leader of the family. But in hindsight, you wonder, could we have done something? Should we have read the signs sooner, reacted, done something?”

Dr. Janet McLeod says that sense of personal responsibility - the overwhelming guilt - is typical of grieving family members. She’s been in family practice for more than 20 years, and is a personal friend of Chisholm’s.

“When someone commits suicide, unlike any other death that I can think of, they involve the people that matter to them the most in a very complicated way,” Dr. McLeod says. “Ironically, many suicide victims believe in their distorted way, that they are doing their loved ones a favour by no longer being around. The opposite is true. The suicide victims have freed themselves from their own personal misery, but their loved ones bear the burden of this freedom forever.”

She believes a book like *Collateral Damage* will help families of suicide victims heal through a sense of kinship.

“It is an incredibly isolating experience to have a family member commit suicide. It is shocking to the family and the community. People don’t often know how to respond and this makes the bereaved even more isolated,”

McLeod says. “Scott’s book will be an invitation for people to share their stories and through the pictures and the words, they’ll realize they aren’t alone.”

Chisholm has no idea how far this will go, where it will take him.

But he knows it’s something he has to do.

“As a survivor of suicide, I have so many questions. Why would a father choose to leave his five beautiful children behind? How could life get so

bad? Why didn't I do something to stop this? If he could see me and my family today, would he make that same choice? Why, why, why?" Through this book, and the images, Chisholm hopes to maybe get some answers.

And at the very least, start a long, overdue conversation.

If you would like to participate in Chisholm's project, *Collateral Damage: Images of Those Left Behind by Suicide*, please call 807-768-5217, email scott@leftbehindbysuicide.org or go to the website, www.leftbehindbysuicide.org.

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