

## In the stillness of the night

Written by BY SEN. BEN PANGELINAN  
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LAST week, I was invited to deliver the keynote address at the I Pinangon Suicide Prevention Forum held at the University of Guam.

He was the best and brightest among us. He was the one that we all followed. He was the one that teachers thought would go the furthest. And among that group there was a U.S. congressman, directors and myself. But as children and as young adults, he was the one that we always looked up to – we wondered, “What was he going to do? How was he going to resolve the situation? What were his thoughts?” We saw something that he did not see. We saw changes that occurred that he could not see. And, in the end, he was the first one to leave, and the only one to leave by his own hands. He was my cousin, he was my brother, my friend and like stillness in the night, I still mourn his loss. And I still ask myself, “Why? What did we miss?”

Some of you will remember in the 1980s a song called “Signs.” Signs, signs, signs. Everywhere there are signs. Do this, don’t do that, can’t you read the sign? Come in, kneel and pray. The lyrics remind me that “signs” are important. Suicide doesn’t happen in a vacuum. Suicide, and people whose lives are touched by it, happens with all these signs out there. I believe we just need to focus ourselves, re-orientate our thinking about suicide and look for those signs. The responsibility must be built within us, so that we are better able to care for our brother, better able to care for our friend. We commit to not rush past them as they deal with life as we deal with life ourselves. We commit to look out for those signs.

The loss from suicide is experienced at the family level, but that loss also touches the community. When we take notice of the signs, we know to some extent what we are looking for – there are studies available and there are experiences we have heard about. Wanting to harm oneself, being trapped in unbearable pain, anxiousness, agitation, behaving recklessly, feeling isolated, disconnected, disjointed – any and all of these experiences can be internalized, and when a person cannot express or externalize them, then the likelihood of suicide is possible. If that person cannot make a connection to someone next to him or her, to some family member, to some friend to reach out and open up to, then we continue to have our work cut out for us. But the audience that night was proof to me that we are making strides in recognizing that suicide is a community problem, that it is not isolated, that it is not the act of one single person and it not only affects one person.

To me, the success of the forum is in its reach beyond academics, beyond theory and to see the work of these young leaders in our community. I believe we can say that there was more than hope communicated through the forum – that there is the realization and manifestation of that hope through each of our actions as we deal with this issue in our community. Our responsibility in addressing suicide as individuals is not separate from the self-responsibility we have as a community to look for the signs and provide resolve at all different levels, including individual, nuclear family, organizational and even the policy level. As I see it, the beauty of government is at work when you take a policy and you feed it through the system and, in turn, the system changes because of that policy. Such a policy has the potential to change the

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consciousness, change the awareness, and change people's perceptions and their attitudes. The forum, in a true sense, was an awakening. It gave all of us there a chance to witness and make the connections needed to address preventative measures encompassing suicide, and to recognize that the academics, the theories, the policies and the people are all at work to provide balance within our community.

Through policy, we have and continue to raise the level of consciousness and the consequence of significant issues that face our community. One example is drunk driving. Many of us know of the impact of drunk driving on our community, the cost to families, and the cost to people who suffer at the hands of drunk drivers. As a community, we have a growing response to those who drive drunk. We now say, "Take away the keys and don't let them drive."

We need to raise that same level of consciousness when it comes to suicide. When we see the signs, we raise awareness and when we know what to look for, we intervene. We take away the opportunity to continue being disconnected. We take away the desire to not be engaged. And we replace it with our intervention and our action to keep connected, whether through academics and policy or meeting up in person and recognizing notable signs.

It took a long time for my cousin to decide to end his life. He didn't do it as a teenager. He didn't do it as a young adult. He was in his thirties. It took him that long and we had some success on a few occasions when we engaged with him. But we missed it. If we had had the same kind of consciousness happening through forums such as I Pinangon, with education and community involvement, we may have saved one life. No doubt, one life lost to suicide is one too many.

Suicide as the fifth leading cause of death, it is almost unimaginable. But we must continue to raise our way of thinking, and believe that our response as a community, as a family opens up alternative possibilities to suicide.

In the stillness of the night, he never disappears. And I never stop asking myself, "Why?" I never stop asking myself, "How?" I just bow my head and say a prayer for him, for me, for our family and for our community.

Si Yu'us Ma'âse'