

Shining Lights Of Hope Gala At Infinity Park Event Center

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The 6th Annual Shining Lights of Hope Gala will be held at the Infinity Park Event Center in Glendale on August 28. The event is a fundraiser for the Carson J. Spencer Foundation (CJSF), an organization dedicated to suicide prevention. They provide training all over the country and are based in Golden, Colorado.

Players from the Glendale Raptors rugby teams will be attending the gala and offering their help in support of the Foundation as an ongoing effort to lend a hand in the community by working with nonprofit organizations throughout 2011.

Executive Director Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas co-founded the Carson J. Spencer Foundation with family and friends in 2005 to preserve the memory of her brother, Carson J. Spencer, who died by suicide after a difficult battle with bipolar disorder in 2004. After his death, *The Rocky Mountain News* wrote a tribute stating: "Carson was a bright star that burned out too quickly."

That theme of stars and lights in the darkness has stayed with the CJSF.

"When I've talked to people who have been suicidal, they often say that they feel like they're in a dark room and there is no way out; it's as though they've been caged by darkness," explains Dr. Spencer-Thomas. "We believe that people can be shining lights of hope for those who are engulfed in darkness."

Dr. Spencer-Thomas' grief over the death of her 34-year-old brother fueled her full-time dedication to the cause. "I was a psychologist before Carson died and intellectually interested in the topic of suicide because it's very complex and has many layers to it, but when my brother died it became a calling."

High Suicide Rates In Colorado

The cause of suicide prevention responds to a serious need in this country, especial-

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again.

- You would like to date one of their friends.
- You would like to stay in touch with their family or you have mutual friends.
- They owe you money.

As the saying goes, "Nothing is certain but death and taxes." I would have to add breaking up to that list.

As always, you can catch up on all of my musings on www.greghollenback.com where anonymous comments are always welcome and discussion is encouraged. Next month I will be writing about surviving a breakup. Until then have fun and "Don't date down."



In Memory: Co-founded by Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas, the Carson J. Spencer Foundation was set up to preserve the memory of Sally's brother who died by suicide after a difficult battle with bipolar disorder in 2004.

ly in western states like Colorado. The relatively low population density of the western states could have in common contributing factors such as isolation, a rural culture of rugged self-reliance that could discourage reaching out for help and long distances between providers of mental health services in remote communities.

According to the *Colorado Department of Health and Environment*, Colorado suicide rates have exceeded the national average by almost 40 percent since data on suicide statistics were first collected in 1910, and more people here die by suicide than by homicide or in motor vehicle crashes.

Innovative Approaches To Solving A Complex Problem

The Carson J. Spencer Foundation has worked to provide innovative and effective programs promoting suicide prevention and supporting those who have been impacted by suicide. The Foundation stands out in breaking new ground in addressing the issue of suicide.

Dr. Spencer-Thomas says that creating new approaches to the complex issues contributing to suicide is a big part of the identity of the Carson J. Spencer Foundation. "We are gap fillers and we are not looking to duplicate the work that other people are doing, but suicide is a really complicated problem and the only way I think that we're going to make a difference is to start looking at innovative approaches and solutions."

That effort has recently been rewarded. CJSF has received the *Bank of the West Innovation in Philanthropy Award for The Fire Within*, an intensive program for high school students providing a year-long course in social entrepreneurship, mental health advocacy and leadership training. The culmination of the program is the creation of a social enterprise, designed and run by youth participants to raise revenue and awareness for suicide prevention.

The students from Rangeview High School in Aurora created and sold bracelets with their slogan, *I choose to Live – I choose to Love*, and dedicated their Senior Talent Show as a benefit to their social enterprise. The audience was admitted to the show only with the purchase of a bracelet and it was a huge success.

Dr. Spencer-Thomas says that the success of the program at Rangeview exceeded expectations.

“Everything in the talent show had to do with overcoming emotional struggles or being there for your friend and I think the fact that they demonstrated a financial commitment as well as an emotional commitment speaks volumes to the level of dedication that these young leaders had to this issue.”

The Carson J. Spencer Foundation has demonstrated their innovative approach to suicide prevention with another program, *Working Minds: Suicide Prevention in the Workplace*. This program is dedicated to helping to develop suicide prevention programs specific to the workplace. It is currently the only one in the nation offering a comprehensive approach to addressing this issue.

The *Working Minds* program is designed to reach out to working-aged people and, within that demographic, the toughest of the group are men. According to the *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, men take their own lives at nearly four times the rate of women and they represent 78.8 percent

of all U.S. suicides. In Colorado, men from 25 to 54 years old account for the greatest number of suicide deaths each year.

Dr. Spencer-Thomas says that even though men are the people with the highest suicide rate they are not being reached. “Men do not think of their distress as a mental health problem; they are typically not help seekers.”

Support For Families And Friends

When suicide strikes families it is devastating. Dr. Spencer-Thomas says that because our culture really struggles with this issue there is an overlay of isolation and self-blame that makes bereavement very complicated. The iCare program developed by the CJSF is designed to reach out to the families impacted by suicide as quickly as possible and to let them know that they are not alone.

Suicide prevention programs like the Carson J. Spencer Foundation urge people to recognize the risk factors of suicide in themselves and in their family, friends and co-workers. Over and over again they encourage those in mental distress to get help. However, Dr. Spencer-Thomas says that many mental health professionals are not adequately trained and are not prepared.

The CJSF has invited Dr. David Jobes, a national expert on suicide risk management, to be the keynote speaker at their Shining Lights of Hope Gala. On the day following the fundraiser, August 29, Dr. Jobes will present an eight-hour workshop for mental health professionals titled *Managing Suicidal Risk in Clinical Practice*.

The Shining Lights of Hope Gala is the major fundraiser each year generating the revenue that supports the operations and programs of the Carson J. Spencer Foundation. The event is open to the public and sponsors are still needed. Registration is available at www.carsonjspencer.org and tickets will also be available on the day of the event at the Infinity Park Event Center in Glendale.
