

Suicide prevention work merits national award

Susan Roach of the Wellness and Recovery Centre honoured by Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention

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NORFOLK NEWS

Susan Roach has come a long way from the Hamilton hotel room where, 15 years ago, she downed a bottle of whiskey and a bottle of pills in an attempt to end her life.

Having told no one where she was, she thinks she would have died had she not staggered to the bathroom and pitched head first into the toilet, dislodging the tank and flooding the room below.

Hotel staff investigating the source of the water subsequently found her and got her to a hospital, where she recovered.

"I can laugh about it now," Roach said. But at the time, the incident – the last of her roughly 40 suicide attempts – prompted her to decide that she wanted to live.

It's a story the mental health advocate shares again and again at meetings, events and training sessions, part of her quest to end the silence around suicide – and save lives.

"We need to be able to say the word 'suicide' and engage with people in a positive way," she said.

Working with her team at the Wellness and Recovery Centre – formerly known as the Haldimand-Norfolk Resource Centre – Roach created the World Suicide Prevention Day walk, established a mental health and wellness collection at the library, hosts public information sessions about the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder and gives suicide prevention seminars



Susan Roach, centre, accepts a national service award from Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention executive director Tana Nash, left, while Community Addiction and Mental Health Services executive director Nancy Candy-Harding looks on.

PHOTO BY J.P. ANTONACCI, NORFOLK NEWS

at workplaces, schools and libraries.

These and other efforts earned Roach a national service award from the Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention, announced last month at the CASP annual general meeting in Waterloo.

"We had many nominations from across the country, and I'm thrilled to be presenting this award to you today. You are doing amazing work in the community," said CASP executive director Tana Nash at the Wellness and

“Suicide is a health issue. We need to be talking about it in order to resolve it.”

SUSAN ROACH

Recover Centre in Simcoe Tuesday morning.

The award recognizes leaders in suicide prevention “who have engaged in

service delivery, advocacy, and service development that has led to a reduction in suicide or its harmful consequences,” criteria that Jean Montgomery says fits Roach perfectly.

“She has done so much,” Montgomery said of her fellow suicide prevention instructor.

“The (suicide prevention) walk has increased in attendance and awareness so much over the last few years. Susan has done an amazing job, just tireless in her ef-

forts for suicide prevention, and to get the community involved. Suicide prevention is everybody's business.”

The perpetually camera-shy Roach seemed embarrassed by the attention, though she appreciated the award's deeper meaning.

“It feels amazing to have come from somebody who was so at risk of taking her own life to being recognized for making a difference in the community by minimizing the risk of others taking their own lives. It's a big

change,” she said.

The award, she added, is a reflection of the work done by local mental health organizations and the community at large to promote suicide prevention.

Roach, who writes a column about mental health for Norfolk News, credited the many businesses that participated in the Wellness Centre's white board campaign, where employees wrote supportive messages on white boards and put up posters educating their customers about what help is available for anyone contemplating suicide.

“This community is much more aware and is much more committed to moving things forward than we realized before that campaign,” Roach said.

Montgomery said advocates must work constantly to keep suicide prevention at the forefront so that those in crisis understand that there is hope.

“We really don't talk about suicide until it happens, and then we say ‘what a tragedy,’” she said. “The mantra here is ‘end the silence.’ Because it's a matter of life and death.”

The second tragedy, Roach added, is when those who die by suicide are no longer spoken of by their grieving friends and families, due to shame or negative stereotypes surrounding suicide.

“The bottom line is, they are human beings who died because of a health issue. Suicide is a health issue,” she said.

“We need to be talking about it in order to resolve it.”

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