



Speech by

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SUICIDE

Mr FELDMAN (Caboolture—ONP) (11.30 a.m.): I rise to inform the House about White Wreath Day and an upcoming White Wreath memorial service which is to be held on 29 March 2000.

It is with a great deal of sadness in my heart that I rise today to inform the House about the need for awareness of the increase in the incidence of suicide, especially in our youth. While we hear a lot about suicide, we rarely see a person who has the intestinal fortitude to stand resilient and do something concrete to raise the awareness of this matter in the public forum.

Whenever this subject of suicide arises, my thoughts go to a friend, a former member of this Legislative Assembly who took his own life in New Zealand earlier this year. I refer to Mr Charles Rappolt. I know that suicide is a matter of concern to all members of this House, especially in relation to our youth.

The adolescent health survey in Victoria found that 5.4% of Year 11 boys and 15% of Year 11 girls reported having had thoughts of suicide in the week before the survey was conducted. The Western Australian child health survey found that, amongst 12 to 14-year-olds, 11.5% reported having considered suicide at some time during the previous six months. Amongst 15 to 16-year-olds, 23.5% had considered suicide. A study of Swiss students suggested that transient thoughts of suicide were common. That is the tragedy. It seems that as our youth approach their teens and late teens the thought of suicide arises.

Today, I wish to highlight a Queensland mother's concerns and a Queensland mother's answer. I refer to the mother of a suicide victim. The woman is Mrs Fanita Clark, the mother of Jason Dean Clark, who was 19 years of age when he suicided on 29 May 1999. He was suffering from depression and paranoia. Mrs Clark describes her loss in two stages. She said—

"I lost him first to depression, and then six months later to death, death by his own hand, suicide."

Fanita describes suicide as Australia's silent killer because of the reluctance of people to talk openly about it except in, maybe, politically correct terms or as statistical data.

However, in a letter to me, as well as to many other members of Parliament, both State and Federal, and feeling quite upset, she wrote these words—

"Rather than go into details, I blame you, past and present politicians for creating this environment we live in, in that our children feel that they are compelled to pay the ultimate price, death."

She then added this poem entitled the Paradox of our Time. It reads—

"The paradox of our time in history is that we have taller buildings, but shorter tempers, wider freeways, but narrower viewpoints, we spend more, but have less, we buy more, but enjoy less.

We have bigger houses and smaller families, more conveniences but less time, we have more degrees but less sense, more choices but less judgment, more experts but more problems, more medicine but less wellness.

We drink too much, smoke too much, spend too recklessly, laugh too little, drive too fast, get angry too quickly, stay up too late, get up too tired, read too seldom, and watch too much TV.

We have multiplied our possessions, but reduced our values. We talk too much, listen too little, love too seldom, and hate too often. We have learned to make a living but not a life. We have added years to our life, but not life to our years.

We've been to the moon and back, but have trouble crossing the street to meet a new neighbour. We've conquered outer space, but not inner space. We've done larger things, but not better things.

We've cleaned up the air, but polluted the soul. We have split the atom, but not our prejudice. We write more, but learn less. We plan more but accomplish less. We have learned to rush, but not to wait, and we have higher incomes, but lower morals. We have more food, but less appeasement. We build more computers to hold more information to produce more copies than ever before, but we have less personal communication. We have become long on quantity, but short on quality.

These are the times of fast food, and slow digestion, steep profits, and shallow relationships. These are the times of more leisure, but less fun, more kinds of food but less nutrition. These are the days of two incomes, but more divorce, fancier houses, but broken homes. These are the days of quick trips, disposable nappies, throw-away morality, one-night stands, overweight bodies, and pills that can do everything, from cheer, to quiet, to sleep, to kill. It is a time when there is so much in the show window, but nothing left in the store room, a time when technology can bring this letter to you, and a time when you can choose to make a difference or not."

She then added—

"If after reading this letter you feel just slightly guilty, then I have achieved my goal. You have now another suicide to add to your statistics."

I wrote back to her, concerned at the tone of her letter, and I also called her. I told her of my police service and the countless tragic events that I have had to cover in my career in the service. I also told her that suicide had touched my family as well, and that I believe that there would hardly be a family that has not felt the disbelief and anguish that suicide brings. But I also left her with a challenge. I wrote—

"The question remains as you posed it. Are you now going to make a difference yourself, or will the pain of the memory of your loss just fade away and become another statistic? If you could just pick out one line of the list in the paradox of our time, have you got the heart to stand and try to make that difference by challenging the line?"

Challenged by this, and other letters that Fanita Clark received, she stood up and made a difference.

The inaugural White Wreath Day was 24 November 1999. This occurred outside Parliament House in Canberra and stands as a tribute to her tenacity and to her work. This Logan City mother—just one woman—so devastated by the loss of her son was moved to raise the awareness of suicide to the public, politicians and media in our society. Mrs Clark refers to suicide as the "silent killer".

On that day, Fanita Clark was joined on the lawn at the front of Parliament House by such luminaries as the Prime Minister, the Honourable John Howard, the Leader of the Opposition, Kim Beazley, Anglican Bishop Richard Randerson, singer Mark Lizotte—otherwise known as Johnny Diesel—and her Federal member of Parliament, Craig Emerson, as well as a host of others, to lay their wreaths of remembrance. 24 November will remain a national day to mark the loss of life through suicide.

Mrs Clark has returned to her home in Logan, but she has not forgotten the efforts of the Logan City Council in assisting her financially through all this. Today, she is presenting the Logan City Council with a certificate of appreciation for its support and encouragement. Mrs Clark was most particular when she said how much the Logan City Council had assisted and encouraged her as she proceeded along the path of raising awareness of suicide within the public arena.

However, she has not let the matter rest here. Fanita has organised, through the council, to hold a White Wreath memorial service in King George Square, Brisbane City, on 29 March 2000. Yesterday, she rang me personally to thank me for the challenge that I extended to her, for the compassion with which I dealt with her letter and for the understanding that I showed in our conversations. I truly believe that this is one of the most positive ways I have ever seen a mother handle such a large degree of loss, grief and doubt surrounding the death of her son.

I know that no matter where Jason is now, he could not be any prouder of his mother than I am because of the tenacity with which she has approached this very sensitive and very thought-provoking subject. I ask that each member of this Assembly, as affected as I am by such tragedies, especially a suicide—a tragedy that befalls our society and affects each and every one of us here as well as our families—to join with me on 29 March next year to express our support and to give our prayers for those young, and sometimes the not so very young, who have lost their lives to suicide.

One of the most tragic things is that the life that is lost is often lost not on purpose, but sometimes in an accidental way. This morning, we have received the tragic news that Australia now leads the world in heroin overdose deaths, with something like 737 fatalities last year. So we all have reasons to pray and support the tenacity that Fanita showed when she raised this matter as a matter of public awareness. I think that supporting her next year on 29 March 2000 at that White Wreath ceremony in Brisbane will be one way to show our full support and our grief at the loss of such young and not so young lives in this manner.
