

## A Long Way Down

### A youth suicide prevention project from Wales, UK

In 2007/8, the small borough of Bridgend, S. Wales saw an estimated 25 suicides in under 2 years of youth between the ages of 15 to 28, all by death by hanging. Below is an extract from a report from The Guardian Newspaper following the suicides:

*'The first reports concerned Natasha Randall. She was, we were told, the town's 13th young suicide in less than a year. And the first girl. A pretty, sweet-eyed, 17-year-old girl whose photo was suddenly everywhere. And whose death, according to the agency report from Wales News which formed the basis of all subsequent stories, was believed to be linked to an "internet suicide cult".*

*On 4 February, a little more than a week later, Angie Fuller, 18, a young woman with a history of self-harm, was found hanging by her fiancé. A week after that, the brother of 15-year-old Nathaniel Pritchard found him hanged in his bedroom, and hours after that, Nathaniel's cousin, 20-year-old Kelly Stephenson, who lived a few doors away and was on holiday in Folkestone at the time, was discovered by her uncle hanged in his bathroom. On 19 February 16-year-old Jenna Parry was found, hanged too, on a piece of common ground near her home.*

*And still the deaths continued: on 6 April, a 23-year-old woman, Michelle Sheldon from Cardiff, hanged herself during a visit to her boyfriend in Bridgend. On 20 April Sean Rees, 19, was found dead at his home in Bettws; on 5 May, in the next valley, Christopher Jones, 23, killed himself in his garden shed. On 16 June Carwyn Jones, 28, was found hanged, followed shortly afterwards by Neil Owen, 26, both of whom lived on the same street as Sean Rees. Then, on 9 August, Rhys Davies, 23, was found, also in Bettws. Lisa Dalton, 25, a mother of one, was found on 10 November, and, all but ignored, 17-year-old Rob Scott Jones was found on a playing field in Bridgend on 28 December.'*

During this time I was employed by Valley and Vale Community Arts as a Community Drama Development Worker based in Bettws, my role being to deliver Drama for Emotional Health projects for ages 11 to 25 in the borough of Bridgend. During this time I worked with many young people through Primary and Secondary Schools, Young Offender Teams, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulty Specialist Schools, Youth Clubs and Pupil Referral Units.

With so many young suicides in a small area, it was hard to find a young person not linked to a death, so its effects were easy to see amongst my participants and clearly on everyone's mind. During my workshops I encouraged the young people to speak up about this subject, and was surprised to find that local schools were discouraging conversation with teachers telling young people they should not talk about it.

I felt the opposite to this. I felt that the young people should be encouraged to discuss their feelings about this, that way releasing the emotions, offering support to each other, and gaining information

on where to get help. We would often spend the whole session discussing the suicides as the young people really needed to work through this issue that offered a lot of confusion and emotional distress.

In response to this, I suggested that theatre may be a way to encourage people to explore what is going on, as well as find support lines, and the young people agreed that seeing something visual and having an open forum where they could express their opinions was something they felt would be beneficial.

With experience in writing and facilitating Theatre In Education plays, I looked to the Nick Hornby novel 'A Long Way Down,' a book that follows 4 characters who meet on a rooftop, all about to jump. As the story evolves their different stories become evident and we see them become a support for each other and pull in different strategies to stay alive. Adapting this to suit a youth audience in South Wales, I created a play based on the themes of the book that toured to colleges and youth venues in Bridgend using local young actors.

The performance was followed by a facilitated discussion on the topics raised in the play and the current issue in Bridgend. Young people were offered a chance to freely speak up and give their opinion in a safe, supportive environment. Alongside the young people in the audience, we invited local councilors, the Youth Suicide Prevention Team, school teachers and the Children and Young People Partnership so creating a forum between the young people and the service providers creating a direct link between the two. Local youth help organisations such as 'Just Ask' came on board, having a presence and bringing information to each performance with useful telephone numbers and web addresses on where to help, plus their resident youth councilors so the young people were given the resources if they wanted to seek help.

Below is an extract from Valley and Vale's website [www.valleyandvale.co.uk](http://www.valleyandvale.co.uk) that shows the feedback from the performances and topics raised by the audience during discussion.

**What did you think of the performance?**

Brilliant, beautifully written, excellent performances, really relevant and important. Loved the fact you dealt with the issues through 'a story'.

Excellent, really made me think about some of the issues raised.

Excellent, all the characters were totally believable, dealing with really difficult contemporary lives, in an accessible way.

I thought the performance was powerful and really portrayed the struggles people have to face each day.

An excellent performance, very moving and powerful, very well adapted.

It pointed out and brought forward many good points about suicide (how it affects the family).

I thought the performance was amazing. It really made me open my eyes and see the realisation of the piece and how the characters were feeling. I thought the man at the start made it much stronger.

**What do you think young people need?**

To be listened to, same as everyone, cared for, respected.

To talk, share; understand that all problems are transient.

People to talk to.

To help each other.

**What do you think are the biggest problems for young people in Bridgend today?**

Isolation and social problems.

Not knowing where to get help.

Self esteem, family tensions.

Understanding that many people have difficult life issues – and they are not alone.

Peer pressure, achievement – or more specifically, how they feel when they under-achieve, feeling inadequate.

Lack of understanding by adults of what it is like being a young person today.

Lots of social confusion, which creates depression.

Not enough social activities to keep children off the streets.

Easy access to drugs is ruining young peoples lives.

Underage drinking/drugs.

Things that make you believe your something your not.

Family problems e.g. divorce/poor areas.

**How do you cope with problems in your life?**

Friends and family.

Talk about them.

Talking things over with someone who will listen, not try to solve everything for me.

Play my guitar, and have a pint.

Not very well.

Contact parents or phone calls to friends.

Lashing out at others.

I relieve my aggressions through the media of music.

Talk to someone, or distract myself.

By sharing with others.

**What do you think young people need?**

Relevant support, a sense of purpose.

Help, support, using art as a tool to express their problems.

Stimulate debate for parents and children – to develop awareness of 'symptoms'.

Security, reassurance, a stable and loving home life, and forgiveness.

**A review from the Arts Council of Wales:**

'It's wonderful to see a show that reminds you how great live theatre can be... The resonance for the audiences (following the many youth suicides in the area) was palpable and the sensitively facilitated discussions following each performance provided a valuable outlet for youth audiences to express their feelings and talk about suicide in a safe environment. At the performances that we saw, we were struck by not only the power of the performance itself, but also the candour with which the audience opened up in the post-show debate afterwards.'

Darwin Community Arts