

Beverly family shares story of police officer's suicide to shine light on mental health struggles of first responders



A photo of Chicago officer Ryan Healy (right) and his partners sits on the table as his father John and sister Erin Ross share his story. Ryan died by suicide Feb. 7, 2013. (Gary Middendorf / Daily Southtown)



By **Donna Vickroy**
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Erin Healy Ross remembers the “normal” Thursday when her family’s world changed forever.

“Ryan called me in the afternoon, and he said I’m just not feeling good. I haven’t eaten in a couple days. I don’t know what’s wrong,” she recalled.

They talked for a long time on the phone, she said, and then she offered to have her husband, a family practice

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m something to eat but he said, ‘No no, I’ll be OK.’”

A short time later, her brother sent a text: “I’ve decided to die.”

“It was the worst because I knew he had a gun,” she said.

On the outside, Ryan Healy was the life of the party, “laughing, never down, just ha ha ha,” said his father, retired [Chicago Police](#) Sergeant John “Red” Healy.

But on the inside, Healy said, his son wrestled with demons so severe they led the 38-year-old Chicago police officer to commit suicide on Feb. 7, 2013 in his Beverly home.

Though time and counseling help the family cope, the pain remains fresh, Healy said.

And so Healy now bucks a long-instilled reticence to talk about the horrors cops witness on the job in an effort to encourage first-responders who are struggling with mental health issues to seek help.

“The things you see as police. It’s unbelievable,” he said. “It never goes away.”

According to Blue H.E.L.P., a nonprofit in Massachusetts run by active and retired police officers, for the third straight year more police officers died by suicide in 2018 than in the line of duty. Of last year’s 159 self-inflicted deaths, nine occurred among police officers in Illinois.

CPD has lost six — two detectives, three officers and a sergeant -- to suicide over the last eight months.

While the department strives to address and tackle the growing issue, Healy and Matt O’Shea, 19th Ward Alderman, are reaching out to the public to increase understanding about the toll post traumatic stress can take on a first-responder.

O’Shea arranged to have “First Responders Story Showcase” presented in Beverly. The free performance will take place [at 7 p.m. Tuesday at Beverly Arts Center](#), 2407 W. 111th St., Chicago.

Heather Bodie is artistic director for Erasing the Distance, the 14-year-old documentary theater group that performs the piece. It collects stories about first-hand experiences with mental health issues, transcribes the text and uses it verbatim to build monologues and shows performed by actors, she said.

“We don’t interpret or manipulate,” Bodie said. “We use the words from the actual storytellers themselves.”

Bodie said after each performance the group hosts a facilitated conversation to allow the people in the audience to share their own experiences or reflect on what they’ve seen.

“My hope for the work that we’re doing is to open up room to disarm some of the stigma, start a conversation and promote healing,” she said.

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a said the officer’s death, and the suicides of others
Beverly.

“When we talk about suicides with first-responders, a number of them have lived in our community,” he said. “It has become more of an issue to me to engage in this push for more resources.”

O’Shea knew Ryan Healy since they were kids.

Tuesday’s stage production, O’Shea said, is the second step in an awareness drive. Six months ago, he said, a prayer service was held at St. Rita Chapel, “where many fallen officers and firefighters are buried.”

Just last summer, he said, there were two more first-responder suicides in the 19th Ward.

“More needs to be done to offer support for officers and firefighters,” he said.

Ryan lived just blocks from Erin and their parents.

“I immediately called 911,” Erin said. “At first they were kind of dismissive until I said he’s a Chicago police officer and he has a gun.”

Then she called her father.

Healy, a 27-year CPD veteran, recalled the troublesome conversation he had with his son one evening shortly before the tragedy.

“He just didn’t sound right,” Healy said.

Ryan spent his five years on the force in the 10th District, one of the city’s toughest. His father said, though his son always appeared happy-go-lucky in social circles, during quiet conversation, he seemed troubled.

“I told him ‘If you’re not happy, the nice thing about the police department is that you can go to different units,’” he said, suggesting the bike unit or possibly mass transit.

Shortly after their talk, Healy said, Ryan took his own life.

Healy suspects his only son was struggling with anxiety and post traumatic stress but was afraid to speak up or seek help.

Cops deal with shootings, domestic violence, missing kids, a distrusting public, fatalities, injuries, he said, and yet an unspoken code compels them to simply bottle up the stress and move on.

“In the old days, you couldn’t show any weakness.” Healy said. “God forbid you said you were afraid. Others wouldn’t want to work with you. But now they’ve finally recognized they’ve got a problem.”

Healy recalled some of the job experiences that have haunted him long into retirement.

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gma, ‘you’re not the real police.’ But sergeants included car crash deaths that occurred in the city and

on the Dan Ryan and I-57 expressways.

“I’d be the one in the hospital in the middle of the night calling your family saying your son or your daughter had been in an accident,” he said. “I can’t tell you how many times I did that.”

The images, the memories, he said, “never go away.”

He recalled one particularly disturbing search for a 5-year-old boy when he was a juvenile officer on the West Side.

“We’re looking all over for this little guy and the firemen came and took the lid off the sewer,” he said. “We looked in and you could see the crown of his head above all the slush.

“I’ve never forgotten that,” he said.

He also vividly recalled the time he desperately administered CPR to a 9-year-old girl who had drowned in her bathtub.

“I’m screaming at my partner, ‘Get the Fire Department, get them out here,’” he said.

The girl died, he said.

Healy said he doesn’t think the job is harder today, but the publicity and increasing hostility toward police adds to the stress.

Media coverage of cops gone awry makes things more challenging, he said. “It makes everything harder for the rest of us.”

While he served, Healy said he lost three colleagues to suicide, one of them a neighbor.

“I don’t relish the limelight but I think it’s important to share this story. For families and for the general public to get a sense of how serious this problem is,” he said.

Ryan loved sports and reading, his dad said. He aspired to be a writer before deciding to follow in the career footsteps of his father and grandfather, wearing the same 9059 CPD badge number they’d worn.

The Marist High School and [Columbia College](#) graduate wrestled with at least two traumatic incidents, Healy said.

He’d been stabbed during a street fight while he was a student at [Southern Illinois University](#) and, as an officer, he nearly lost his thumb in a serious squad car accident, Healy said.

ted his son.

“But I was always told you never take it home to your family. You don’t discuss it. So where does it go?” he asks and then answers by hoisting an imaginary glass.

“Don’t let anybody tell you the parent doesn’t feel guilty,” Healy said. “Why didn’t I drive over there? Why didn’t I sit down with him? We talked for about a half hour on the phone but I thought we’d resolved this. Obviously we didn’t. Obviously something was bothering him.”

Last year, Healy participated in a training video for the Chicago Police Department. He went back to CPD a few weeks ago to help with another program for sergeants and lieutenants.

“They have finally recognized that this is a problem and they’re hitting it head on,” he said. “Every year we’re losing 5-6-7 more. Now the fire department is in the same predicament. It’s happening across the country.”

Healy said it’s not easy for him to talk about the pain of losing his son.

“Every holiday, every birthday, every family event or occurrence, there’s a void,” he said. “I talk about it now because if I can save one life, well, that’s all I want.”

dvickroy@tribpub.com

[Twitter @dvickroy](#)

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