



**mhca's e-Newsletter**

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## Hope is Our Greatest Future

*A guest article by Dr. Gregory A. Hudnall*

When I worked as a high school principal, I lost five students to suicide. Our school district is in Provo, Utah, a community of 120,000 residents and home to Brigham Young University. We were the seventh largest district in the state. I am ashamed to admit that our school district of 15,000 students was averaging 1-2 suicides a year, including the death of a fourth grader who took his life while on campus. Though it was difficult and challenging for my staff and students, to be so close to these suicides, we as educators felt that it was the role of the local community and mental health agency to address the concerns, not ours. At the time, I felt that schools were not equipped to address suicide or serious mental health issues.

Then one evening I was contacted by the Provo Police asking if I would be willing to come down to my school and help identify the body of a fourteen-year-old who had just taken his life by suicide. He had no identification on him, so they turned to me, the principal. It was by far one of the most difficult things I have ever had to do. After identifying the body, I walked to my car and literally threw up and sobbed. This was an amazing young man who came from an amazing family. At the time, we were not

aware of any warning signs of suicide. I later found out that he had broken up with his girlfriend and the event pushed him over the edge. As I sat in my car wiping away the tears, I made a vow that I would do all that I could to help prevent any more youth from taking their lives.

The next year I was promoted to the district office. I sponsored a lunch where I invited numerous agencies including the local mental health agency, the hospital, the local law enforcement, the juvenile court, the Boy Scouts and others. It was a packed room as I shared my request for help. We spent the next five years creating a community model that included the mantra, “While it takes an entire village to raise a child, we believe it takes an entire community to save one.”

We partnered with the QPR Institute and began doing suicide prevention training across our community. We held trainings in schools, churches and businesses. In schools with my level of influence, we trained every employee including custodians, hall monitors, lunch ladies, secretaries, teachers and administrators. Every year, we trained each new staff member. In the community, we trained over 5,000 residents. But even with all these trainings, we were still losing kids to suicide. Then, one year, we had a freshman at Provo High School return from the Christmas holiday and give his watch to his best friend. He then went on to tell his friend that “his family would be better off without him.” He went on to tell five other friends that he was going to take his life by suicide. Not one of those friends told an adult. The very next day he died. It was an enormous loss.

After this experience, we knew we needed to do something more. The research was showing that seven out of ten young people who take their life by suicide will tell a friend and the friend will not tell an adult. We knew then that we needed to start involving the students in suicide prevention. We spent a year looking at every school-based program in the world. None had what we were looking for and what we felt was the most critical piece, “peer to peer” or helping kids help kids. We found that students were already talking about it. What we needed to do was to figure out how to channel that into a positive support system.

We went to Timpview High School, a high-end demographic school right next to the local university. It was one of the three high schools in our district that had had the most threats, attempts, and suicides over the previous ten years. We went through every English class and asked every student to answer, “If you were struggling and needed to talk to someone, please list the names of three of your friends you would feel comfortable talking too.” We did not even mention suicide. We wanted to find ways to intervene early with those struggling.

The most amazing thing happened from asking that simple question. The same forty names rose to the top. It was incredible. We did the same thing at thirteen elementary schools, three middle schools and

the other two high schools in the district. The students identified at each school decided to call themselves the “Hope Squad.” It was amazing to see these young people feel so empowered in reaching out and helping their peers who were struggling. Every year we saw hundreds of kids referring peers who were struggling. We went our first year without one suicide, then another year and then another. We went nine years without a youth suicide in our school district. It was amazing!

To hear more about this community model for youth suicide prevention and the Hope Squad peer-to-peer program, attend my sessions during the upcoming Summer Conference in Salt Lake City. I look forward to seeing you!

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*Greg Hudnall is the founder and Executive Director of **HOPE4UTAH**. He has championed suicide prevention in Utah schools and communities for over 20 years. His expertise is not only sought after locally, but also nationally at the highest levels of government. His efforts have recently been featured on **NBC Nightly News** and in **People Magazine**. We hope you enjoy his sessions in Salt Lake City.*

## Join Us in Salt Lake City!



### Explore Hot Topics

If you're looking for innovative technology solutions that will help you disrupt behavioral healthcare, or you're curious about how you can make the best use of all available data for outcome measurement, then you need to join us in Salt Lake City. We have exactly what you're looking for.

[See the Full Agenda](#)



### Connect with Your Peers

It can be lonely at the top - but it doesn't have to be! Get to know fellow behavioral healthcare leaders during our sessions and nightly receptions. Review the registration list ahead of time to identify a few people you'd like to get to know better, then come **prepared with a question or two** to get the conversation started.

[See Who Else is Coming!](#)



## See the Sights!

Utah's capital boasts breathtaking scenery along with amazing restaurants, breweries and music venues. Whether you opt to walk around [Temple Square](#), hike the [Living Room Lookout Trail](#), or book the [Ultimate SLC Tour](#), there is beauty to discover around every turn. After working up an appetite, you can get brunch at [The Park Café](#), get your taco fix at [The Red Iguana](#) or grab the Machine Gun sandwich at [Bruges Waffles & Frites](#). For music, check out [The Depot](#) and [The State Room](#), then grab a local brew from [Uinta](#) or [Epic](#) – but proceed with caution at this altitude.

[More Things to Do!](#)

Help Us Celebrate mhca's 35th Anniversary!



## Winter Conference 2020

We hope you'll plan to join us at [mhca's 2020 Winter Conference](#) to help us celebrate our 35th Anniversary. Throughout the conference, we will have special activities and events to honor our founders, celebrate our successes and prepare for the challenges and opportunities of the future. This exciting event will be held March 3-5, 2020 at the Sandpearl Resort in Clearwater Beach, Florida, and will include a special celebratory reception and casual beach-front buffet dinner on Wednesday evening. The conference agenda and additional event details will follow in November.

[Book Your Room!](#)

## Have Something to Say?

[mhca](#) is looking for original articles, podcasts, videos and interviews with behavioral healthcare thought leaders. Submitting guest posts is a great



way to share your perspective and start conversations with your peers. If you're interested in seeing your work in this newsletter or online at [mhca.com](http://mhca.com), email your ideas to Lonnie Parizek at [lparizek@mhca.com](mailto:lparizek@mhca.com).

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