

Good Afternoon / Evening House of Representatives, Distinguished Guests and Concerned Citizens:

My name is Kerri Gray, and today I am here to talk about my Aunt Joan.

Joan Richardson, born May 5, 1951, was the only aunt I knew growing up. She was my mom's sister, the youngest of four siblings who grew up together on Walcott St. in Newport. Aunt Joan relied on the strength of those around her. She had many phobias that she carried throughout her short life, her diagnosis was Manic Depressive, known today as Bipolar Disorder. Aunt Joan was not only afraid of her own shadow, but she was terrified of the ocean water that she grew up just a stone's throw away from. She struggled medically, socially, and psychologically. In her bad days she would harm herself by reopening old sutures, purposely causing infections to gain attention from doctors and family. In her good days she enjoyed playing games like Old Maid and Rummy, she avidly collected clowns and Avon, and she loved to spoil her niece and nephews.

But this story isn't about her life unfortunately – This story is about December 19, 1991, this story is about her death, her suicide, and how it could've been prevented. This story is about how her suicide affected the 9-year-old child that I was then and continues to affect my life in ways now.

In 1991 Aunt Joan had a particularly difficult year. She pushed away those close to her and fell into a deep depression. She longed for her mother, whom she had lost a few years earlier. Aunt Joan didn't visit the gravesite often in Middletown, where both of her parents are laid to rest. But on that snowy covered day of December 19, 1991 she decided to make the drive to the island, however she never made it that far.

No one knows for sure what thoughts were going through her head, or if she had a predetermined plan prior to reaching the bridge that day. What we do know for certain is that, from Bristol, she pulled onto Mt. Hope and as she approached the top of the bridge, she put her car in park. A passerby noticed she began to exit her car, and this good Samaritan informed the toll booth workers. One of the officials began to drive up the bridge and witnessed Aunt Joan go over the edge without hesitation. She fell 110ft. to the cold crashing saltwater below. While in the air she lost consciousness, because of this, when she hit the water it crushed nearly every bone in her body. However, this was not the cause of her death. She suffered even further, as water was found in her lungs, and officially she drowned.

When I came home from elementary school that day, I was greeted at the door by both of my parents and I knew something was wrong. My mom was crying and made me sit down next to her. I had never experienced a death before. My mom struggled trying to explain to her innocent 9-year-old daughter what death meant, what suicide meant, and how I would never see my Aunt Joan again. I couldn't understand how she fell off the bridge, because surely, she didn't want to die, right? I blamed myself. There must have been something I could've done, should've seen.

The guilt ate at me from the inside, haunting my dreams and, in time, manifested as suicidal thoughts of my own. I had nightmares of her jumping, replaying over and over in my head. How did she look while falling? Was she tumbling, or did she fall just straight down? Did she hit the water on her back, or did she belly flop into the waves? And in my nightmares, she would stop at the top before jumping, to point at me and tell me it was all my fault. I carried this pain and guilt for years. As a teenager I was put into therapy due to my self-harming acts, I was cutting myself, starving myself even, due to the emotional pain. A part of me wanted to die, to end the pain I was feeling. It wasn't until years of therapy and 2 trips to a hospital in Boston that I realized how much her suicide had affected me, changed me, depressed me. I finally found the strength at 14, 5 years after her death, to see myself worthy of living. I realized that if my suicide would cause harm to another life that I couldn't do it, even if I could only count my plant, someone needed to water it. I stand here today and can honestly say that I did find my strength, and that I would never intentionally hurt myself again or plan to kill myself. Yet, I continue to be affected by her suicide and to fight for my own strength. Last year I started therapy called EMDR to help alleviate my PTSD symptoms specifically related to her suicide. For the first time in my life: I know, and I believe, that her suicide was not my fault.

Unfortunately, my mom didn't see the same logic as I did. She fought her own and different battles. However, when my mom was contemplating suicide one of her responses was that "Joan did it to be with my mom, why can't I do it to be with my dad," and continued on by saying the girl who was afraid of her shadow, let alone of water, went through with it so why couldn't she. Although my mom did not use a bridge, I do believe her suicide in 2000 was influenced by the pain and guilt that she carried for her sister.

My Uncle Roy, Aunt Joan's oldest brother, had also blamed himself. Following the news of Joan's suicide, the anger he felt towards himself resulted in him breaking both of his hands. Before his death in 2000, he could not speak of his sister without talking about this guilt through his tears.

I am here today, to give my Aunt Joan a voice, to give my pain and guilt a voice. Safety barriers would've, and should've, saved her life. My aunt was scared of the water, afraid of drowning her whole life. Although Aunt Joan had threatened suicide at times in her life, those closest to her knew that it was a cry for help and attention. If there had been a barrier in place, forcing her to hesitate, forcing her to think of her actions in reality, she never would've followed through in jumping over the edge to be submerged by one of her lifelong fears.

Suicide by bridge jumping has been more lethal than any other type of suicide. Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem, crisis or pain. Studies have shown survivor's immediate regret, finding that in any given year 95-100% of those that survive realize the moment they jump they made a mistake. In one example, all 29 participants regretted that they had jumped. Another study of 515 people that survived had regretted jumping, of which 7% went on to take their lives. Steven Miller, district bridge manager at the Golden Gate Bridge, has stated that the barrier is meant to be as much a mental deterrent as a physical one. Dr. John Draper,

Director at the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline declares that by reducing the access to lethal means, bridge barriers are the optimal means for preventing suicide. In support of his claim, in 2013 researchers in Australia analyzed nine studies across the world on the effectiveness of suicide barriers, they concluded there was a reduction in suicide cases by 86 percent.

These barriers do save lives, they save heartache, they save 9-year-olds, and 38-year-olds and everyone affected by suicide from a lifelong battle of guilt. December 19, 1991 didn't have to be the day I learned about death, about suicide, and it didn't have to be the day that I started to carry guilt and blame myself.

Joan Richardson was only 40 years-old when she jumped off Mount Hope Bridge. She had a whole life ahead of her still. But in her darkest moments what she needed was a hesitation, a come back to reality, something to tell her not to. The safety barriers would've done just that.

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