

TOUCHED BY TRAGIC LOSS

BY RUSSELL B. LEMLE
AND JASPER CRAVEN

FIREARM LEADERS
ARE CHANGING
THE COURSE
OF SUICIDE
PREVENTION.

For much of his career, Joe Bartozzi, an avid sports shooter and former attorney for O.F. Mossberg & Sons, paid little heed to the American suicide crisis. After experiencing a number of suicides, including those of family members, that changed. “For me, suicide became personal,” he said.

SINCE 2018, when Bartozzi was named president and CEO of the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF, nssf.org), he’s pushed reform. From his position, he’s spurred the industry to acknowledge and address the link between guns and suicide. Among other things, NSSF has produced informational websites, aired public-service announcements (PSA), webcasts, and disseminated “Have A Brave Conversation” messaging toolkits to firearm distributors and retailers. In these projects, NSSF has partnered with the U.S. Concealed Carry Association (USCCA, usconcealedcarry.com), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA, va.gov), the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP, afsp.org) and other suicide-prevention experts.

In July 2022, Bartozzi pushed further. He co-organized the first firearm-industry suicide-prevention roundtable in Denver, Colorado, meant to meaningfully attend to firearm suicide from

within. He brought in influential manufacturers, including Smith & Wesson, Glock, Magpul, and Ruger, where the attendees pledged to contribute to the effort and make this event annual. Bartozzi is unrelenting in his mission to prevent the type of tragedy that’s forever marked on his mind. “I’m not going to stop,” he said.

Half of all American suicide deaths involve guns. The final decision to attempt suicide often occurs within minutes. At those moments, ready

access to a gun affects whether the outcome is fatal. For decades, however, the firearms community’s focus was elsewhere and did not engage this subject. A growing constellation of Second Amendment advocates, who, like

Bartozzi, were transformed by the intimate pain of suicide, have begun to successfully counter this stance. They’ve forged a reform movement that recognizes that reducing firearm access for at-risk individuals saves lives.

Another presenter in Denver was Mike Sodini, the third-generation owner and operator of Eagle Imports, a flourishing firearms business in New Jersey. In 2009, Sodini’s close friend and Eagle Import President Bill Strohmenger, shot and killed himself during a personal crisis. The tragedy tormented Sodini who, in 2018, founded Walk the Talk America (WTTA, walkthetalkamerica.org), a non-profit meant to reduce suicide by establishing common ground between gun owners and mental health professionals. He’s motivated gun makers such as Armscor, Avidity Arms, Bersa, Grand Power, Metro Arms, and Ruger to insert material in their product packaging that offers links to free, any-



PHOTO 241178137 © GRAPHIXCHON | DREAMSTIME.COM

mous mental health screenings. Strohmenger's death is forefront in Sodini's consciousness and is honored on every WTTA flyer.

Alongside Sodini was Sarah Albrecht, a Pennsylvania range safety officer (RSO). In 2018, after an 18-year-old family friend died by suicide using a firearm, she founded Hold My Guns (holdmyguns.org), which connects gun owners with Federal Firearms Licensees (FFL) to provide voluntary, temporary off-site storage options. The non-profit is partially funded by firearm and accessory manufacturers, including HK and Mantis.

The Denver event was also co-sponsored by the VA's Suicide Prevention Program. Its executive director is Dr. Matthew Miller, a veteran and range shooter who lost a close friend to suicide during his last year of service in the U.S. Air Force. Under Miller's stewardship, the VA has held the "Gun Safety Matters Innovation Challenge" and the "Mission Daybreak Grand Challenge" initiatives that led to new prevention strategies. Those strategies include novel ways to securely store firearms.

Other Second Amendment advocates are also building projects that inexorably alter the firearm-suicide-prevention landscape. They

include Ralph Demicco, a gun shop owner who launched the countrywide Gun Shop Project after three customers in a week died by suicide within hours of their purchase; Steve Eliason, a Republican Utah lawmaker who authored groundbreaking gun-safety legislation following the suicides of three teens at his son's middle school; and Brett Bass, an NRA-certified rifle and pistol instructor and Afghanistan combat veteran whose buddy died by suicide. Bass is now a key force in the landmark Safer Homes program (saferhomescoalition.org).

These champions can do what public health officials could not: Use their unassailable pro-firearm credentials and speak from personal experience of loss to ensure these messages break through. They're overcoming the industry's misapprehension that firearm suicide prevention is a form of liberty-suppressing government overreach. As the Denver roundtable demonstrated — as did the President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide (PREVENTS) — the effort to join hands with the government to prevent firearm suicides can be mutually beneficial. With the firearms community on board, we can better work to turn the tide. **GA**