

November 17th 2009
Jan Harrison

For Melissa

One evening I came home and found my beautiful daughter hanging from a rafter. I came up the driveway and the house was in darkness and I felt dread. I had rung a couple of hours before to check as I always did and there was no answer. I thought she was with her girlfriends after school as she sometimes did. Nothing could have prepared me, absolutely nothing could have prepared me for what I found. I opened the door and put the light on and there two feet in front of me Melissa was hanging. In less than a second I went from having a beautiful daughter of eighteen with a life ahead of her to devastation. In that moment my life shattered into a million pieces. I got on a chair and tried to lift her down. I knew it was too late as her fingernails were blue a sign that she had been dead for a little while. She was cold and heavy. I didn't scream or say anything, it was beyond any expression. I phoned a friend and he phoned the police and before he arrived the police were there treating my home like it was a crime scene. They wouldn't get her down even though I kept asking them too. They said go outside and I couldn't go. I couldn't leave Melissa. They were asking me questions and looking around with her still hanging there. When they finally got her down I asked to hold her and said do not be too long as the van was there to take her away. I insisted and held her while they were still in the room. I had no private time with her. They kept saying they wanted to take her. One policewoman made a comment on my mothering and I cannot remember what she said although I remember feeling very guilty. I couldn't say anything back and I have never forgotten.

She had been to the university counsellor a couple of days ago. I had spent time convincing her to go saying how they would be able to help her as that is what they were trained to do. That they would understand her problems and be able to give her some insight into what she was going through. I said it is better to talk to someone else apart from me. I knew she had some difficulties however at no time did I ever think she would do this. She had never spoken about it.

I took me a couple of years to be able to ring the university counselling service. I said I would ask for freedom of information if they would not let me see the counselling notes. I was given a time with the head of the service he hadn't seen Melissa and said he was speaking on behalf of the counsellor who did see Melissa. He said the counsellor was no longer working there. He said Melissa had talked about suicide but because she was over the age of eighteen they wouldn't tell me because he said "they would have lost her as a client". I was too shocked to reply, she was dead. I said if they were not willing to give me responsibility of looking after my daughter who I had looked after for eighteen years, then what did they do to keep her safe. They said they had spoken to a doctor who asked if she was taking any substances. As she wasn't they considered she wasn't at risk. A friend of Melissa's said she cried throughout her last counselling session. I also learned

that her boyfriend said she had taken some Valium that I had from a couple of years ago which I knew nothing about. It was a simple question if they didn't look after her and I didn't know she was thinking of suicide how was she going to be kept safe. He was very dismissive of me and wanted me to leave.

Somehow I managed to get another appointment. This time I got together a small album of photos of Melissa from when she was a baby up to when she was eighteen. In many of them she was smiling and having a good time. I wanted her to be seen as a lovely girl with a life and not a statistic. A young girl about to become a woman, someone they could relate to. A friend came with me as I wanted someone to witness their behaviour to me. She was also a published writer on depression and suicide. My treatment was different as soon as I showed the photos; I could see the woman counsellor was shocked. She couldn't dismiss this smiling girl who could have been her daughter or child or a friend's child. She promised to look into the confidentiality issue and said she would have told me Melissa was talking about suicide. She also said that she would change the confidentiality policy and it would be brought up in the university training sessions. She rang a couple of times after, however I didn't have enough energy to follow up on whether she really did change the confidentiality policy. I was struggling to keep going myself. I hope she did. On leaving I said if you do not change your policy and inform the parents or someone who cares you will have another student like Melissa come in for counselling and suicide too.

- I wish I had had someone at the house who understood about suicide and wouldn't make insensitive remarks.
- I wish I could have spent more time with Melissa holding her before she was taken away and in privacy too.
- I wish the counselling service had informed me that Melissa was talking about suicide so I could have removed some of the stresses in her life that contributed to her depression.

I do believe that Melissa would be here today if the confidentiality policy did not exist. I agree we have a right to privacy however when a person is very depressed they do not have the ability to look after themselves.

Jan Harrison

Mother of Melissa who died in 1995 at the age of 18 of suicide