

Depression is a hidden, unrelenting killer

Seventeen-year-old Kelty Dennehy had everything going for him, but he suffered from a mental illness that eventually took it all away

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Vancouver Sun

WHISTLER - It is difficult to imagine a more inspiring space than the loft in Ginny and Kerry Dennehy's home.

The mountain peaks wink at you from the windows. A late summer light filters in.

Yet there is a hint of tragedy here. It is affixed to the cedar beam at the pinnacle of the house. It is a silver crucifix.

This is the spot where the Dennehys' 17-year-old son, Kelty, hanged himself on March 2, 2001. This is the spot, his mother's study, where his father found him, grabbed him in his arms and tried desperately to save him.

He was such a beautiful boy. With a bright, beaming smile, he looked on the outside like a poster child for a hockey team. But inside, he was sick. He suffered from depression.

Like a closeted monster, it remained hidden until Kelty was 16. Then it started rattling in its cage and charging down its stealthy path of destruction. The signs were slow at first and puzzling. Once he and his family could see it for what it was, there was no turning the monster back.

Near this spot, hundreds will gather this weekend at the Chateau Whistler golf course, which has been donated by the hotel, for a fund-raising tournament. It was here that Kelty once worked in the summers. Through their foundation, the Dennehys are determined to raise money for research and resources to help crack the code of silence surrounding a disease that claimed the life of their son, to help everyone -- from parents like themselves to top psychiatrists -- to understand the disease better and to make sure that everyone who needs help gets it quickly. To this end, they are bent on raising \$4 million to set up a chair on depression at the University of British Columbia. Details of that campaign can be found on their Web site at www.thekeltyfoundation.org.

They want to share the story of their son.

Full of promise

Kelty Patrick Dennehy was born Nov. 23, 1983, to a life of privilege. His mother works for IBM. His father is a realtor. The family has had addresses in Kitsilano, West Vancouver and finally, in a prestigious suburb overlooking a golf course in Whistler.

He was, by all accounts, a lively, happy youngster who loved sports and did



Kelty Dennehy



AGE THREE | Kelty Dennehy was a beautiful child who had everything going for him.



AGE FIVE | The oldest of two children, Kelty Dennehy was a lively, happy youngster who

reasonably well at school although he wasn't a top scholar. His parents were, and still are, happily married. He had one younger sister, Riley, who was born three years after him.

When Kelty was in Grade 7, the family moved to Whistler, where he snowboarded and played hockey, taking to the game like so many Canadian kids do.

He started attending summer hockey camp at Notre Dame, a private Jesuit school in Wilcox, Sask., which is famous for its sports and rigorous academic standards.

Kelty was the type of kid who wanted to excel. He set the bar high for himself.

In Grade 10, he decided to go full time to Notre Dame, which is a boarding school. So at the tender age of 15 he left home for the wind-blown Prairies in search of hockey and the halls of academe.

He was homesick as so many kids are when they first get there and disappointed that he didn't make the top hockey team.

"It was tough for him, but he hung in there," said Ginny.

He decided to return to Whistler for Grade 11 and had a fantastic year. His year of studies at Notre Dame had taught him how to study and work hard in school and had matured him.

At the end of Grade 11, he was the only male in the high school in Whistler who made the honour roll.

But there was a disturbing incident at Christmas that Grade 11 year. His parents now see it as the first sign of trouble.

The whole family was on a cruise ship with two other families, travelling to the Panama Canal to celebrate the arrival of the new millennium. Kelty had been playing games, jumping in the pool, chasing girls and partying with the kids from the two other families.

Then, recalled Kerry: "He became moody because of some crack his sister made about him. He couldn't shake it off."

He looked his father in the eye and said, "I am going to throw myself off the cruise ship."

Kerry couldn't believe it. "It was almost like getting hit in the face with a baseball."

He could see the kid meant it. He had to bar the door of the cabin to prevent his very agitated son from carrying through with his threat.

He called the ship's doctor who came to give Kelty a shot containing a sedative. He also called a priest on board, knowing his son believed in God and had developed a religious side at Notre Dame.

While others in the vacation party rang in the millennium and celebrated on the ship, Kerry wound up staying with Kelty in the cabin for almost two days, ordering in cheese sandwiches and soup.

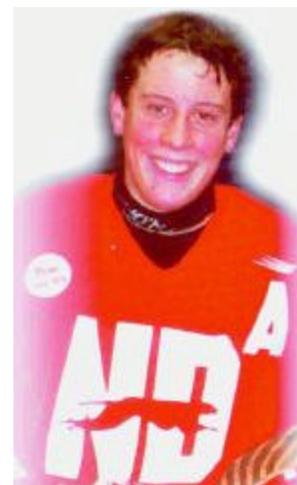
"Dad, I don't know what's wrong with me. This thing grabbed me," Kelty told him.

loved sports -- he set the bar high for himself and wanted to excel.



CREDIT: Bill Keay, Vancouver Sun

Ginny and Kerry Dennehy, who lost their son Kelty, 17, to suicide, are hoping to raise enough money at a golf tournament in Whistler this weekend to fund a chair on depression at the University of B.C.



Age 17 | Shown a month before he took his own life, Kelty Dennehy was a skilled hockey player and snowboarder.

"We just prayed together. I said, 'Kelty, we will stand by you no matter what happens. We don't understand it but we will get the right help. We will take care of you.'"

When he recovered from the episode, Kelty became ashamed and wondered how he could face others on the cruise ship. Kerry and Ginny explained to the other families that something had overtaken their son and that they had had to protect him from harming himself. Kelty returned to his friends on the ship.

"This cloud, this black demon on his shoulder or whatever it was that hit him did not return for the rest of the cruise," Kerry said.

Kelty didn't want to talk about what had happened to him for fear he would have a repeat attack.

Kelty's parents never got him help when they returned to Whistler, partly because Kelty didn't want any and partly because they were anxious to put the incident behind them.

Said Ginny: "We figured, well, he seems to be okay because he is here with his friends and having a great time. He was a real goof-around kid. He always liked to make people laugh. He continued to be the same type of person. He was good old Kelts again."

Added Kerry: "We didn't know what happened on the ship, but we wanted to forget it as soon as possible."

There were good reasons to feel confident. For the rest of the Grade 11 year, Kelty was eating and sleeping well. He was playing hockey and he was in great physical shape.

Then, at the end of Grade 11, he told his parents he wanted to return to Notre Dame in Saskatchewan for Grade 12. Given his homesickness when he was at the school in Grade 10, his mother had some qualms about sending him back, but her son was insistent. He felt he needed to be challenged.

"He knew he could compete," Kerry said. "He started to ask us about universities in the East. His aspirations grew."

Kelty saw his return to Notre Dame as "the medicine he was going to take to make him a man," recalled Kerry. "It was like he was choking it down. He was saying, 'I'm going to be a better man for it.'"

So it was off to Notre Dame, where he had a fairly good first term but some problems in math.

At Christmas, the same families who were on the cruise ship took off together, this time to Mexico. Again, Kelty was having a great time with the other kids. Again, on New Year's Eve, he did something a little strange although not nearly as troubling as on the Panama cruise.

"New Year's was a huge deal in Mexico. Fireworks, balloons, three different bands," Kerry recalled. But Kelty was nowhere to be found. He had disappeared to his bedroom. When his mother found him there, he explained to her that he thought he had had too much to drink, but she saw no signs of intoxication.

KELTY'S DESCENT

The family returned from that vacation and it was time for Kelty to return to Notre Dame. It was at this point that he began his rapid descent. Just two months later, he would be dead.

Recalled Ginny, "I was taking him to the airport and waiting for his flight. He said to me, 'You know, Mom, I don't feel that good about going back to school.'"

She tried to brush it off, telling him that it was always hard to get out of vacation mode and that she wasn't too happy about going back to work.

"I remember him going through the gates," Ginny said through sobs during an interview. "He kept on turning around and waving at me. I remember walking away and I thought to myself, 'I wonder if he is

okay."

When she got home, he phoned and she asked him how he was. "Mom, I don't think I'm very good. I was sitting on the plane and I felt like I was on this roller-coaster and I kind of got into this big pit and I was thinking all these terrible thoughts. I just didn't want to be there. Mom, I don't know what to do."

Then he finished the conversation the way he nearly always did with his mother. He told her he would be okay. She now realizes that he was trying to protect her from the truth.

To this day, that saddens her to the point of tears. "Kelts and I were extremely close. He would tell me everything. He was just such a loving kid. He would be in the village with his friends and he would come up to me and give me a big hug in front of all his friends. What kid would do that at 17?"

Then the phone calls started coming from their son. Sometimes three or four a day.

"He was losing focus," said Kerry. "He couldn't sleep. He wanted to do so well in school, but he lost concentration, so his marks deteriorated. He had such high expectations."

Disparaging remarks from teachers magnified in his mind, particularly one from a math teacher who told Kelty he didn't have a hope of passing a test.

His parents phoned the school and got medical attention for their son. "The school was supportive," said Ginny. "They were confused as well, because he had made such a right turn."

At this point, Kelty was seeing a priest and a school counsellor. The calls home kept coming.

"He was desperate," recalled Ginny. He couldn't sleep and was failing in school. He told his mother over and over that he didn't know what was wrong with him and he just wanted to be normal.

Kelty called and said he needed one of his parents to come out, so Kerry went for a weekend in January. The two of them booked into a hotel in Regina, which is about half an hour from Wilcox, where they prayed together and Kerry did everything he could to cheer his son up. They went to The Keg for steak, to a Regina Pats game and a Tom Hanks movie. Kerry bought his son new hockey equipment and suggested he start a journal, which Kelty agreed to do. "I thought it might help," said Kerry. "I'm an amateur father, not an expert."

When Sunday night rolled around and it was time for Kerry to leave, Kelty looked at him and begged him not to go. Kerry initially argued, telling Kelty he had to get back on track in school, but then relented when he saw how desperate his son was.

He delayed his flight another night and, by chance, was able to take in one of his son's hockey games on the Monday night.

It was here he witnessed another red flag.

"I'm going to get into a fight in this hockey game for you," Kelty told his father.

Kerry was utterly perplexed. His son was not a fighter. He had discouraged his son from fighting. Whatever would have possessed him, he wondered, to do something so out of character? True to his vow, Kelty looked up at his dad in the last period and got into a fight, bragging about it later.

On the Monday night, "I felt so bad when I left him in my rental car. He was standing in the snow. He was looking back at me. I left as late as I could. He turned around and walked back into the dorm. I felt like I had abandoned him."

When he returned to Whistler, the phone calls from Notre Dame kept coming. This time, Kelty was demanding that his mother fly out.

So around the beginning of February, she went. While there, she got her son all dressed up for a school dance. She was so proud of how handsome he looked.

She had a meeting with the priest at the school and with Kelty's counsellor, who lived in Regina. The priest told her that Kelty was troubled and that the school was trying to help him.

Her meeting with the counsellor didn't go as well. She had driven to his home in Regina. "I don't even like to think of it. It was just so weird. He was talking about some personal problem he was having." He shaved in front of her, telling her he hadn't had time before her arrival. She was in shock about how he behaved during their meeting.

On that visit, she took her son to a restaurant. "He was so confused. He said, 'You know, Mom, what do you think dad would say if I became a priest?' I said, 'Dad would love you no matter what.' In the same breath, he was talking about going into the army. He was all over the map." Later, "I just hugged him and lay on the bed with him. I patted his head. I wanted him so much to be better. He was so worried about me being worried about him."

He kept saying, "Mom, I'm going to be okay. I'm going to be okay."

As she was set to leave, he told her he was feeling much better. "I drove away and I hoped he was better. I just didn't know. I was getting so confused, too. When you want something so much, you kind of will it into yourself. I wanted him to be better."

CRIS FOR HELP

The following weekend, Kelty went to Manitoba with the school team to play hockey. Both sets of grandparents came out to see him. They had a wonderful get-together.

When Kelty got back to the school, he phoned his parents to tell them about it. Then he said, "I've got to come home."

His parents knew he could lose his entire school year. But they also knew it was true.

So he came home on Feb. 14, supposedly for a week, although he was never to return to the school. The night he arrived back in Whistler, he had all of his friends over. They played pool downstairs and seemed to be having a great time. "He was trying to do anything to make himself feel better," Ginny said.

"Then Kerry and I are sitting up in the bedroom watching TV and this big beautiful gorgeous boy comes in and he is crying. He says, 'Mom, I just want to be normal like everyone else.' I said, 'Come here, Kelts.' He lay with me on the bed and I just rubbed his head. I told him everything was going to be all right. He slept with me that night. I just held onto him."

The next day, Kerry took his son to the clinic in Whistler. "I had my son on my hands. I knew that I had done all that I could do. I didn't have the expertise to do more. I was looking for anybody I could find to help him."

The doctors at the clinic did their best, but "they have such a hard time switching hats from the snowboarder who sprains his knee to this kid from Whistler who has these mental problems."

It was obvious to Kerry that his son didn't believe anyone could help him. He just shrugged and went through the exercise. One of the doctors prescribed an anti-anxiety drug, which is supposed to help when a patient hits a low in depression.

Said Kerry of Kelty's depression, "The switch was going on and off, on and off. This is no longer the point of a normal kid being depressed. We're way beyond that. We were hopeless. We were so overwhelmed by our son going downhill."

Kerry took Kelty to a psychologist in town who wound up seeing him twice.

Meanwhile, Kelty kept on snowboarding and seeing friends, but he was being hit, sometimes two or three times a day, by bouts of major depression. He would take some of the drug and then just hang on until the bout went away, so he could have another spurt of normal living. "I'm sure there were moments of sheer terror," said Kerry. "He didn't feel like a boy anymore."

Then the moment came when Kelty told his father, an avid outdoorsman and hunter, to hide the guns in the house.

"Are you serious?" Kerry asked his son.

"I swear to God, Dad, it's that bad."

He asked his dad if he could stay home permanently rather than return to Notre Dame. "I want to feel that I am in a safe place," he told him.

Kerry took his son into the bedroom and said, "If you promise me this will be a safe place for you, I promise you you will get better."

Kerry hid the guns.

He also asked Kelty's doctor whether he should be guarded. His doctor said no. He prescribed good food, plenty of rest and lots of fresh air and exercise with friends for the troubled youth.

So Kelty spent the last week of his life snowboarding and talking to his parents, while they tried to comfort him.

Then he did something that Ginny is convinced was a plot to get her out of the house so he could commit suicide. He wanted to make sure she would go on a planned business trip to Florida.

He asked her if she wanted to read his journal. In it, he wrote about how much friends and family meant to him, about how he would do anything for his mother and how he felt he was getting better.

After his mother left, Kelty had a friend sleep over. In the morning, he walked the friend to school, told him there was something he wanted to talk to him about, then changed his mind.

He returned home and fell asleep on the chesterfield. "He looked quite tired. He was lying peacefully," said Kerry.

That was the last time his father would see him alive.

A FAMILY'S GRIEF

Kerry had a friend in town and they decided to go skiing. But deep inside, he was worried about Kelty.

At noon, Kerry called his son on his cellphone from the ski slopes. The phone rang and rang. No answer. Kerry went with his friend to have a late lunch, then called again around 2 p.m.

Kelty answered, much to Kerry's relief. But it was short-lived.

"Kelts, what's up?"

"I love you, Dad. I love you, Dad. I love you, Dad." Kelty was sobbing.

Kerry told him he was coming right home to help him. Kelty told him he didn't need to.

As soon as he got off the phone with Kelty, Kerry called 911 in Whistler and told the ambulance service his son was suicidal but not violent and that they should go to his home just in case. He told him the door was locked but he gave them the code for the side door.

He asked them not to turn their sirens on in case he was over-reacting. He didn't want to embarrass his son.

Then he raced home from the ski hill. He went to the front door and found two ambulance attendants.

"What's going on?" he asked them. They said they didn't know.

"My nose took me upstairs to Ginny's office. I saw him hanging there. I grabbed him. He had used garden hose. I cried out, 'Oh, God!' They cut him down and started resuscitation. On it went from there. They wheeled him into the ambulance and went with sirens blaring to the clinic."

Doctors arrived and tried to get a heartbeat. They got a glimmer of a pulse and put him on life support. Kelty's pupils were dilating which meant he had a reaction to light. A helicopter was called and he was flown to Royal Columbian Hospital in New Westminster, where he was on life support for 1 1/2 days.

"He looked as beautiful as he always did," Kerry said. "We sang to him, whispered in his ear, told him we loved him."

His nanny, friends and family came to say goodbye. A priest came to give him the last rites. There was closure.

Then a brain scan revealed he was brain dead. He was removed from life support.

When the couple returned to their home in Whistler, they were met by a constable who told them Kelty had left a suicide note.

It read: "Don't worry. I'm watching all of you from the Heavens. Heaven is a better place than earth, so look at this that way. I love you all. Mom, dad, Ri and all Friends and family. No research or how this came to be will ever be understood. My depression was in my mind. PEACE and I love you all, God bless, Kelty."

His parents take solace from the fact that Kelty was able to donate his heart, lungs, liver, kidneys and cornea to give life and vision to five other people.

They believe he was at peace with himself when he died.

Some days, they comb through memories, sifting for clues to their son's illness.

"If I had read all those books on depression, I wouldn't have left his side. I would have handcuffed myself to him. I would have committed him," said Kerry. But he added, "I believe people with depression suffer so greatly that God could be sitting on your right-hand shoulder and it wouldn't be enough."

More than two years later, Ginny still spends hours in her office. Sometimes, she feels her son's spirit dancing with the shadows and the sun. Sometimes, she walks with friends. Anything to shake the sorrow.

The numbing grief has lifted a little. Kerry, a Catholic, finds himself taking refuge in a church from time to time. He talks to his son on the golf course. "Sorry, Kelt," he will say after hitting a bad shot. He tries to be a better person.

But there are terrible moments.

HOPE

A soft rain is falling outside on a mild September day. Kerry's eyes light up. He remembers a time he saw his son coming out of the shower. "His hair was all wet. He had a towel wrapped around him. He was so beautiful. A thrill went up and down my spine."

Tears roll down his cheeks.

God snatched his son. He can't understand why.

Kelty's old bedroom has been entirely changed. But there is a clue to who the former occupant was. It is a painting on the wall by Rod Charlesworth, a Kelowna artist, which shows Kelty in his Notre Dame uniform playing hockey with his sister. Some of Kelty's clothes are still stashed at the home. His parents haven't found a way to deal with them yet.

Kerry dreams of the day when depression will be treated like a disease, like diabetes or cancer. "The problem is it is invisible. If you have four people sitting on a park bench, you don't know which one has depression."

There are people who say those with depression can't be helped.

Kerry doesn't agree. He and his wife want to help.

WARNING SIGNS OF POSSIBLE YOUTH SUICIDE:

-A previous suicide attempt by the young person, a friend or family member.

-Talking about suicide, saying "life isn't worth living," or writing or drawing pictures about suicide and/or death.

-A total change in behaviour, where the young person is withdrawn, depressed, complains about not being able to sleep, lacks an appetite, stops seeing friends.

What should a parent do?

Get the young person to a doctor immediately.

What can others do?

-Reach out and show you care.

-Be a supportive listener, but never promise to keep a suicide plan secret.

-Never leave a suicidal person alone.

-Get help from a parent, teacher or other adult.

Phone numbers to call for help:

Kids Help Phone, 1-800-668-6868; Parents seeking help with or for their children, 1-888-603-9100. Both are toll-free and offer professional help 24 hours a day.

Crisis Centre 24-hour distress line: 604-872-3311 (Lower Mainland); 1-866-661-3311 (toll free around B.C.).

Local crisis centres are listed in the front of telephone books.

Profile of Kelty Dennehy.

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