

?There is a Rehteah in every single community?



By Brock Weir

They mean well, but sometimes they don't think before the words pass their lips.

They are looking to comfort, but their efforts can often compound the problem.

?Look at you, Leah,? Leah Parsons recalls a fellow mom saying to her at one of her daughter's basketball games. ?God only gives you what you can handle.?

Parsons, whose daughter Rehteah took her own life after seventeen months of torment following sexual assault and cyber-bullying, simply couldn't hold her tongue any longer.

?I said, ?Really?? she continued. ?So, did God miss Rehteah? Because he gave her more than she could handle?

Ms. Parsons delivered a powerful message to students and parents Thursday at the a series of mental health summits spearheaded by Cardinal Carter Catholic High School and Sacred Heart Catholic High School and hosted in Aurora.

Speaking with students earlier in the day on the circumstances which led up to Rehteah taking her own life in 2016, aged just 17, by the time parents joined their kids for the evening summit, Ms. Parsons switched gears the power of healing.

It was ?less heavy,? she said. Perhaps, but it was no less powerful for the audience.

?I know in my heart of hearts that is not what she wanted,? said Leah. ?If she could have changed in the next moment, she would have. Unlike a lot of people who suffer in silence, Rehteah did not suffer in silence. She spoke out and shared all those horrible thoughts and scary thoughts she was having with me on a regular basis.?

Leah remembered her daughter as a ?very cautious child? who always watched everything very closely before putting herself into any situation.

She settled into her hometown at the age of five and went all through elementary school with the same circle of friends, kept top marks, and harboured ambitions of being a marine biologist. Leah says she was just starting to find herself in her first year of high school when she and a friend went to a sleepover at a friend's house.

?She obviously felt very comfortable and safe in her peer group that day because, if she didn't, she wouldn't have put herself in a vulnerable position,? said Leah. ?She didn't even know what the alcohol would do to her body. Everything I had taught her about how to be safe went out the window because suddenly she was intoxicated. At some point, two other males showed up [and there were] four males, two females drinking.?

The mother of one of the teens came home, she said, went to bed, and the girl that accompanied Rehteah to the party left her there with the others.

?Rehteah was assaulted that night by four males,? said Leah. ?Somebody thought it would be a good idea to take a picture of her assault, so a photo was taken, the boys went to school, told a story of the party girl, the slut, and, in the community Rehteah loved her whole life, suddenly she had no value because she had been labelled. We all know what happens with labels ? everyone else jumped in and Rehteah became a target of really cruel harassment.?

Rehteah struggled with this for 17 months, putting herself in hospital because she was terrified by her own thoughts. The hospital

treating her didn't have trauma-informed care, said Leah, and as they were not treating her for her trauma she came out worse than when she went in.

Every time she changed schools ? and she had to change schools often ? the photo would show up and the cycle would begin again. ?She acted in a moment of impulse and she took her own life,? said Leah. ?All my coping mechanisms I had learned over the years went out the window. Nothing worked. Nobody ever prepares you for this type of trauma.?

In the years leading up to Rehteah's birth, Leah had developed a number of ways to cope with the hand life dealt her. Trauma, she said, began in utero as an ?unwanted? child who was put up for adoption. Eventually adopted as the youngest of seven children in her Nova Scotia family, Leah said her first memory of grief is when her dog Skipper was struck and killed by a car when she was walking home from a picnic with her brother.

Leah remembers saying to herself over and over ?I didn't like that dog anyway? until she was sobbing into her father's chest. Grief was a new feeling, and from that point on, she did everything she could to detach from things ? her primary coping mechanism. Raped as a teen by an older teen she had a crush on, she blamed herself and did not share her trauma with her family. Instead, she said, she did anything to numb the feelings, becoming ?promiscuous?, and stumbling through a life that took her to bartending gigs in Florida and New York City, before she returned home, centred herself, completed her post-secondary education and had Rehteah at 28.

After Rehteah lost her battle, Leah said she lost her spirituality. Her inner voice told her, ?You're just not going to make it through this one. You're not going to make it unless you step back on a spiritual path,? but if that was the same path that took her child away she had no time for it.

?I knew a door was closing on me,? said Leah of the thought of becoming bitter and angry. ?Or, am I going to reach through that door for hope, for love? I had to learn how to love myself so deeply, so fiercely and I never had to do that before. The guilt was allowed to come, the why me, but they weren't allowed to take up residence in my body. I was giving them room, I was giving them space to be felt. No more pushing things away because that just wasn't going to work anymore. I had to stop listening to all the voices and I had to choose to love life.?

It was, of course, a struggle. She still had those ?What if?? thoughts of what if she found Rehteah sooner? What if she went up the stairs faster? She had to ask herself if that was really true, interrupting those thought cycles and exploring her mind and body for truth.

?Being curious instead of condemning has a huge impact,? said Leah, who carries on her daughter's legacy through the Rehteah Parsons Society. ?She inspired me to change my life. Her message is still strong. She is not able to carry forth her message; she does it through me now. She still inspires me every day to be her voice, to speak out against rape culture, cyber-abuse, but she continues to inspire me and still walks with me. I never wanted to be a public speaker, didn't want to go to university in case somebody asked me to speak, but I am now her voice and I have stepped on that path to carry her voice forward.?