

# STORIES OF HOPE

## “Get the Words Out!”

By Sue Bergesen



I am both a consumer of services and a family member. While I work hard to live with my own illness, it is my sister Barbie's suicide in 1999 that has made me determined to do what I could to make a better world for all the "Barbies" in the world. I was helping my 80-plus-year-old mother organize family pictures the other morning and even after 10 years, the pictures of my sister — so beautiful and smart and kind — struck us both like a blow. Over 33,000 people die by suicide each year, we cannot keep losing special people like Barbie because of these devastating illnesses.

In my role leading a large consumer-run national organization, I heard story after story of the pain and anguish my fellow peers go through every day. I also heard story after story of the amazing work consumers are doing to turn their lives around, to move into recovery and then give back to their peers. I want to do my part, to help support recovery principles and practices within this system, to eliminate the anguish and support the journey to recovery for every single one of my fellow consumers. For me, this is not a job, it is a calling.

Through the work that I do around QPR: Question, Persuade and Refer, I feel strongly that I contribute to the overall well being of families and communities that want to learn about this issue that affects us all. I am still surprised that there is a lack of awareness about suicide. People think that if you talk or ask about “it” the other person will be offended. One of the things that we learn in the QPR trainings is to get the words out.

To family members and friends of a person who is struggling with suicidal thoughts, I want to encourage each one of you to ask. Engage the person fully. Ask even if it's embarrassing or you're uncomfortable. Asking if someone wants to commit suicide is a loving act. I want to persuade you to unfreeze and get the words out. If they tell you that they are thinking about it, seek help immediately.

To clinicians and professionals, I want to ask you to be persistent and ask. There are many ways that a person can tell you that they are thinking of committing suicide. You are a lifeline to their well being, please be creative. Someone who is contemplating suicide has lost hope. They don't have a sense of the options open to them, part of your job is to help them think of all the options they have in front of them.

When I teach QPR I share the goose story because it reminds me that there is always hope. I trust and hope that each one of us want to do everything we can to keep someone alive. I also believe that suicide is not inevitable.

### **The Goose Story**

By Dr. Harry Clarke Noyes

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Next autumn, when you see geese heading south for the winter, flying in their familiar “V” formation, you might be interested in knowing why they fly that way. Science has learned that, as each bird flaps its

wings, it creates uplift for the bird immediately behind it. By flying in a “V” formation, the flock together gains over 70% more flying range than if each bird flew on its own.

Like the geese, people who share a common direction and a sense of community can get where they are going quicker and easier, because they are traveling on the thrust of one another.

Whenever one goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of trying to go it alone. It will quickly try to get back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the birds in front. If we have as much sense as a goose, we will stay in formation with those who are headed the same way we are going.

When the lead goose gets tired, it rotates back in the wing, and another goose takes over the point position. It pays to take turns doing hard jobs!

The geese from behind honk constantly, as you’ve no doubt heard whenever a flock passes overhead. They do this to encourage those up front to keep up their speed. An encouraging word goes a long way! Finally, when a goose gets sick or is wounded by gunshots, and falls out of the formation, two geese follow it down to stay with it and protect it. They stay until the goose is either able to fly again, or dies. They then launch out on their own or with another formation to catch up with the group.

**If we have the sense of a goose, we will stand by each other.**

Susan Bergeson is charged with overseeing OptumHealth’s public sector network operations by providing guidance, strategy and fostering a culture of Recovery and Resiliency. She promotes practices that are anchored in the belief that people with mental illness are able to live, act, work and participate productively in their communities despite their disability, and are resilient and able to rebound from trauma, stigma and other stresses with a sense of mastery. Ms. Bergeson is a consumer with the lived experience of recovery. She is also a family member who struggled to support her beloved sister who died by suicide in 1999.