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02

## [The butterfly effect: when media breaks the silence on suicide](http://www.walkleys.com/butterfly-effect-media-breaks-silence-suicide/)

SEP, 2014

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**When Heath Harrison and his *Border Mail* team put suicide and the gaps in mental health services on the front page, the local community responded. Artwork by Peter Sheehan**

There was nothing I could do, but my mind was racing.

It was the early hours of another cold winter morning in Albury-Wodonga and by now the August 4, 2012 edition of *The Border Mail* was printed, the trucks were loaded. In a few hours, our readers would be waking to what I thought was the most important edition in my 15 years at the paper.

But those few hours felt a lifetime away, and the space between now and then was fertile ground for panic and doubt.

As a newsroom, we had been talking about doing something “real” about suicide for almost two years. After a whirlwind few weeks, the talk became reality.

In a few hours, I’d hear that thump on the driveway. And pretty soon after that I’d know whether we’d got it right, or very wrong.

About 16 months earlier, Albury schoolgirl Mary Baker had taken her life after a three-year battle with anorexia.

Mary was 15. She came from one of Albury’s best-known families. Her father was a former mayor of Albury. Her death devastated the family and shocked the community. More than 1000 people attended her funeral service which the family held in the city’s civic square in a remarkable act of courage and generosity.

They were qualities I got to see first-hand when I sat at Annette and Stuart Baker’s dining table, some 14 months later.

With features editor and close family friend Jodie O’Sullivan, I was there to ask them if they would not just feature in, but lead a campaign we were going to launch on suicide in our community. Even allowing for Jodie’s careful broaching of the subject in the months before, it was a horrible thing to ask.

We talked for two hours. Annette spoke of Mary, her battle, her love of poetry. She spoke of her anger at a mental health system that failed her daughter and continued to fail the family in their grief. Like us, they were concerned about their son Jack, who had joined *The Border Mail* as a cadet reporter the previous year.



([http://walkleys.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Sheehan\\_Albury-and-butterflies.jpg](http://walkleys.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Sheehan_Albury-and-butterflies.jpg))

Illustration by Peter Sheehan

They had their reservations but they agreed to be involved because, like us, they believed something needed to be done.

“We’re trusting you with this,” said Annette, tears in her eyes, smiling but serious. “Don’t stuff this up.”

It wasn’t just about Mary. Before, and after, the teenager’s death, we had been increasingly disturbed about reports and rumours of suicide in Albury-Wodonga.

We didn’t report them, having been warned by health authorities that doing so had the potential to trigger copy-cat responses.

We’d been conditioned to think suicide was too hard an issue to deal with, but by averting our eyes it felt like the too-hard basket had become the easy option.

On Facebook and Tumblr, kids were talking about suicide, mental illness and self-harm in terrifying detail. What were we achieving by ignoring it?

We felt powerless and the families felt alone. Buoyed by changes to the Australian Press Council’s guidelines on reporting suicide,

*The Border Mail* started to research the ways it could begin a community conversation about suicide and mental illness.

We approached families who had been touched by suicide and worked with some of them for months to ensure their stories would be told in a respectful manner.

We consulted authorities including 2010 Australian of the Year Patrick McGorry and beyondblue chairman Jeff Kennett, who both endorsed the project and became part of it.

And on August 4, we launched our *Ending the Suicide Silence* campaign with a four-page wraparound, and the promise of a week-long examination of suicide and mental illness.

There was no sport on the back page, just Dr McGorry and a panel featuring information

on where to go for help.

“There are real solutions available to us to significantly reduce the numbers of Australians who needlessly die by suicide. But to solve this problem, we must first talk about it,” he wrote.

Inside was the Bakers’ heartbreaking story. On the front page was a picture of Mary, her brothers Jack and Henri, and our statement of intent, headlined “It’s time to talk”.

It read, in part...

*“It is our hope, and the hope of the families sharing their stories, that this campaign will encourage you to talk to your family and friends about a subject too often shied away from. We want your involvement and your feedback.”*

The feedback started early From mates and colleagues. Then a message from Jodie to say the Bakers had said “well done”. Sweet relief.

That response flowed on to the website via reader comments and exploded two days later, in our next edition, when we launched our campaign for a headspace centre for Albury-Wodonga.

Headspace is Australia’s national youth mental health foundation. It has 57 centres across the country, but our region had been overlooked.

As part of the headspace push, we published butterflies in the paper, and encouraged readers to sign them and send them to us so we could stick them up in the window of the office in the main street of Albury. We’d eventually collect almost 5000, and our windows never looked so good. The butterflies were taken to Canberra and presented to the federal mental health minister, Mark Butler.

Under the direction of online editor Matt Cram, the Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/AlburyWodongaNeedsHeadspace> (<https://www.facebook.com/AlburyWodongaNeedsHeadspace>)) attracted more than 5000 “Likes” and became a living extension of the campaign, where the community offered each other support and shared stories, artwork and ideas.

Crucially, that Facebook page took the campaign to young people. Analysis of the page showed 33 per cent of its audience were aged between 18 and 24. The same demographic accounted for about 22 per cent of the audience on *The Border Mail’s* Facebook page.

So overwhelming was the response, the weeklong campaign was extended another week as more people came forward and yet more issues emerged.

We carried 54 news leads, including 12 front pages. As well as the personal stories, we examined and exposed cracks in Albury-Wodonga’s mental health system. Every edition featured a panel of information outlining where to find help.

Through phone calls, website comments, letters to the editor, Facebook posts and tweets, our readers thanked us for opening up the discussion, and offered support for those who shared their stories.

We owed the success of the campaign to the courage of the amazing families who agreed to speak with us. Publicly baring your soul in a community the size of Albury-Wodonga requires extraordinary bravery.

It was clear they wanted to help others avoid the pain they were going through, and they spoke with unflinching and heartbreaking honesty.

Take Annette Baker’s despair.

*“The hardest thing is living life without her. I think of what Mary would be doing now – getting her licence, riding her horse, all the stages she would be going through But you know people have moved on with their lives when the casseroles stop coming.”*

Wayne and Leanne Koehler offered the poem they had written and read out at the funeral of their 20-year-old daughter Aimee Lea.

*“There’s no-one to blame – that won’t help at all. But the system needs to change for the kids who stumble and fall. Because no matter how much we asked, no matter how much we pleaded, Aimee never received the help she so desperately needed.”*

Take Teena Conway, who lost her 15-year-old son Zac.

*“There is no such thing as normal for us anymore, not our normal.”*

The stories weren’t just about young people. There was Helen Woolley, who lost Ray, her husband of 23 years and father of her four children.

*“I felt like I knew him more than anyone. But as much as you can tell someone 100 times they are worthy, they have got to believe it themselves. He was in a horrible place where he truly believed he was a burden to us.”*

And there was Ingrid O’Neill, now recovered from postnatal depression, who took us inside the living hell from which she had emerged: 24-hour surveillance, the removal of all cords, drugs and sharps from the house for the protection of her and her son.

*“At my darkest time, I was battered day and night by pervasive thoughts of harming myself and Lachlan.”*

Treating their stories with respect was paramount. We did all we could to ensure they were comfortable with how their stories were told and presented. When the Bakers didn’t like our plan for the front page, we changed it... and we got a better front page.

These families were more than subjects, they became partners.

Teena Conway started up her own headspace petition to complement ours and collected more than 1000 signatures.

Laura Koehler, Aimee Lea’s sister, produced and promoted content on the Facebook page. Stuart Baker joined the delegation which drove to Canberra to present the headspace butterflies to Mark Butler.

Earning that trust didn’t happen by accident. It was down to our commitment to bring about change and to the sensitivity and professionalism of the reporters involved. Brad Worrall, Ashley Argoon, Di Thomas, Jack Baker and Jodie O’Sullivan told the stories beautifully, a point not lost on the Walkley judges who made special mention of the quality of their writing.

As a newspaper, from the cadets to the editor, it was a team effort. The photographers, subs and designers all played their roles, as did the general manager and other staff who encouraged us. As did the classifieds ladies, who collected and stuck up the thousands of butterflies in our windows.

Sharing the load was crucial. It was too much for one or two. This was emotional terrain for our reporters and their wellbeing was closely monitored. It was made clear that counselling was available to all of them.

The fight goes on. We know people are still taking their lives. Albury-Wodonga does not yet have a headspace centre – an intolerable situation that must be rectified.

Our community demands it. There are still gaping holes in the system that is supposed to care for those needing help and those left behind, grappling with their grief.

I am no longer at *The Border Mail* but my successor, Di Thomas, is carrying the baton with great determination. And I watch on with pride as Ashley Argoon, the cadet whose passion and energy became the heartbeat of our campaign, keeps the butterfly flag waving.

The last word goes to another cadet, Jack Baker, perhaps the bravest of all.

Telling him our plans, that our campaign would feature his sister and his family, was one of the toughest conversations I've ever had. I offered him the chance to get away until it was all over.

He didn't want that. He wanted to be part of it, and he inspired us all.

*"We will never get to see our sister and daughter and friend again," he wrote. "We have no choice but to live with that. But out of this tragedy and the countless other tragedies there has to come a positive. By talking about suicide and seeing it for what it really is – needless death – we can help shed light on the darkness."*

**Heath Harrison** was the editor of *The Border Mail* from 2008-2012. He is now the deputy editor of the *Newcastle Herald*. [Find Heath on Twitter here.](https://twitter.com/HeathHarro)  
(<https://twitter.com/HeathHarro>)

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Clare Fletcher

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