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COMMUNITY

Beacon of Light Park shines focus on mental health

Gazebo centrepiece in memory of Erika Elkington

TINA COMEAU
TRICOUNTY VANGUARD

Within view of the Yarmouth Regional Hospital where Erika Elkington was born in September 1985, people gathered to officially open a park where a gazebo in her memory will shine as a beacon of light when it comes to mental health.

Erika, people were told at the Sept. 14 ceremony, spoke five languages, had three degrees, operated her own business, loved to travel, was athletic, enjoyed adventure and made people smile and laugh.

She was not the type of person, her father said, that you'd associate with suicide.

But Erika died in Houston, Texas, on Aug. 6, 2015 – one month shy of her 30th birthday – after taking her own life.

Just as their daughter Erika loved to travel, her parents Bill and Sabrina Elkington have been on a journey too – however theirs has been in coping with and understanding their daughter's death.

They have pledged to speak up, rather than cover up, mental health issues such as depression and suicide.

The couple – who lived in Yarmouth when Bill was involved with the tin mine – returned to Yarmouth from their Edmonton home to talk about Erika and mental illness, and to be a part of the park's opening.

Bill said suicide happens in all walks of life and in communities everywhere. And the numbers continue to grow.

When they held a celebration of life for their daughter following her death, the parents had a task for those who attended.

"I said to everybody... go home and ask your loved ones if they've ever considered self-harm. If they've ever thought of suicide," Bill said. "After that we received a whole bunch of calls... It was friends or family, people who had been at the celebration of life, and they said, 'We went home and did what you said. We asked our family if they'd ever considered self-harm, if they'd ever consider suicide, and they said yes.'"

So what to do moving forward?

"We created the Erika Legacy Foundation so that other families wouldn't have to live through what we are going through," Bill said, his voice quivering with emotion. "That's our purpose to help others."

In the process, he said they've learned a lot about the science of mental health.

"People don't recognize that it is a physical illness, as well as a mental illness," he said.

"The science around the brain is just starting to be understood. You use 2.6 per cent of your mind consciously, 97.4 per cent is unconscious or subconscious... You can't control what your mind comes up with unless you really channel that 2.6 per cent, and to be able to do that



People gathered on Sept. 14 for the official opening of the Beacon of Light Park located near the Yarmouth Regional Hospital. The park is a mental wellness initiative of the Yarmouth Regional Hospital Foundation. The gazebo, built by the NSCC Burrigge Campus carpentry class, is in memory of Erika Elkington who committed suicide in August 2015. She was born in Yarmouth.

TINA COMEAU PHOTOS



Erika Elkington. FROM ERIKA LEGACY FOUNDATION FACEBOOK PAGE



Bill and Sabrina Elkington, Erika's parents, stand next to a plaque outlining their daughter Erika's life at the Beacon of Light Park.



Yarmouth County resident Elizabeth Wright performed at the ceremony and shared some her own mental health journey.

you need to advocate for yourself, you need to advocate for others you need to advocate for your loved ones."

"We have (to have) the conversation about how you're actually feeling, and (have) people feel comfortable enough to talk about what is happening in their brain and what is happening in their mind and what they feel," he said. "That's the way we'll turn the tide on suicide. A million people a year die by suicide and yet we don't talk about it."

ABOUT THE PARK

The Beacon of Light Park is a mental wellness initiative of the Yarmouth Hospital Foundation.

Overlooking the Yarmouth harbour, it provides a place that can be enjoyed by hospital staff and visitors and the public at large. The gazebo – built by the NSCC Burrigge carpentry class – serves as the centerpiece.

"Three key elements came together to lead us to the Beacon of Light Park," said Paulette Sweeney-Goodwin, managing director of the Yarmouth Hospital Foundation.

"Number 1 was a generous donation from JV Driver in memory of Erika Elkington. Number 2 was access to additional funds for mental health initiatives through the estate of former local businessman Richard Shapiro. And the third element was the availability of land."

The Yarmouth Hospital Founda-

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dation acquired the land for \$1 from the former South West Nova District Health Authority.

Yet of the elements mentioned, the true catalyst that led to the park was Erika's story and her connection to Yarmouth, Sweeney-Goodwin said.

"Local businesses and individuals enthusiastically embraced the project and brought the park to life," she said. "And we're only just beginning. Over time additional elements will be added, however Erika's gazebo will always be the center point of the Beacon of Light."

MORE VOICES

The Sept. 14 ceremony also included song and music, performed by Michael Wheatley and Elizabeth Wright.

Wright spoke about her own personal connection with mental health. She was in Grade 4 when she said she found out what real sadness is and in Grade 5 when she lost her direction. It wasn't until many years later that she got the help she needed.

"I was in Grade 10 when I changed my perspective on everything and really learned that I didn't have to blame myself so much for what was going on inside of my head," she said. "Sometimes we don't have that much control over how our brains work and how we feel about things."

Wright always played music. But she even lost that for a while. There was a time when music didn't make her feel the same way that it does now.

She spent time in the hospital, seeking help for her mental illness. Eventually, she said, she went to university.

And then something else happened.

"It was Christmas break, there were two youth in one week that took their lives," she said. "I got so sidetracked on realizing how beauti-

THANK YOU

A plaque at the parks read that the Yarmouth Hospital Foundation thanks the following donors who have made the Beacon of Light Park possible:

- JV Driver
- NSCC Burrigge Campus Quality Concrete
- R&D Harris Excavating
- Charles Jess, engineer
- Richard Shapiro estate
- Aberdeen Paving
- Burton Bain
- CAT Concrete Castings
- Churchill Lumber
- Cleveland Excavating
- Doug and Elaine Thistle
- Harbourside Lodge
- Heart and Stroke Walk-about
- L&N Signs
- Mike Wheatley
- Pleasant Supplies
- Sea Crest Fisheries
- Tim Hortons
- Scotia Metal Products

ful life was again, that I had forgotten that I wasn't the only person who was experiencing those feelings or had to overcome those feelings."

Wright said she still didn't see people talking about mental health to the degree it needed to be talked about.

She set out to change that. "I said, what is it going to take to really start this conversation? How many people do we have to lose? How many families have to suffer? How many suffer in silence?"

She started visiting schools and through her words and her music talked about mental health, mental wellness and her experience.

"When I was in Grade 4 or 5 experiencing these feelings for the first time, nobody wanted to talk about it. How do you talk to little kids about that?" she said. "But they do know. They do feel things."

Two plaques were unveiled at the Sept. 14 ceremony at the Beacon of Light Park – one acknowledging the supporters of the project and another sharing some of Erika Elkington's story.

"If I ask you for anything it's to watch out for each other. Understand there's a lot more to it to how that person feels and acts," Erika's father said. "And if you see somebody who is struggling, be compassionate, try to understand, try to advocate for them because often they won't do it themselves. Get them the help they need."

"We were here 35 years ago for the building of the tin mine," he said. "Erika was born right here in this hospital. So, it's very fitting that a piece of her will be here with you."



A group photo wearing Live to Inspire t-shirts made possible from the Erika Legacy Foundation.