AMERIS BANK

NEWS RELEASE

World Mental Health Day

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World Mental Health Day is Sunday, October 10. This day focuses on raising awareness and ending stigmas surrounding mental health. Even if you personally might not be experiencing mental illness, your friends or family may be affected in ways that you do not know. That is why it is important to learn about mental health and have empathy for those around you as others may be struggling internally.

To commemorate this World Mental Health Day, read the story of our own Ameris Bank teammate, Market President Bill Lutes, as he shares a personal story regarding mental health and mental illness.

My Story – by Bill Lutes

My son died on January 7, 2014. Everything after finding my son is a giant blur. Andrew's future seemed so bright. He had just graduated with honors from the University of Florida, had been recruited by the Big Four accounting firms and had already accepted a position with one in Atlanta. Then, in an instant, it was over.

There was no note, nothing at all to tell us what he was thinking in those final moments. He didn't reach out to anyone to tell them he was depressed, suffering or suicidal. For a long time, it was easy to judge and blame myself for not noticing something, anything. I was his father after all, how did I miss this? All I could do for months in my grief and despair was search for answers. Why? Why would he do this? Why wouldn't he have talked to us? To anyone? I spoke to everyone he knew - roommates, recruiters, advisers, professors, the dean - and they were all as bewildered as our family. No one saw this coming. No one saw Andrew as a young man who would end his life.

The truth is there were signs of depression long before that night, things we didn't recognize until we looked back in hindsight, that he was experiencing. His friends had noticed he was more withdrawn and stayed in his room instead of socializing. He was dealing with severe insomnia. He was less responsive to text messages and phone calls. He

wasn't shaving every day, started wearing the same clothes repeatedly and became less concerned about his appearance. For a meticulous kid like Andrew, this was unusual behavior.

Andrew, like so many others who die by suicide, learned to mask his pain and suffering. He put on a big smile, was loving and caring, and always willing to help and please others. I tried to understand what led him to this decision but the more I learned about severe depression, I came to understand that Andrew was simply a young man struggling with an undiagnosed mental health condition. The reality was he was hurting badly, nobody knew how much, and he saw no other way out.

Path to Wellness and Recovery

Andrew and I were very close and my world was rocked. I knew my life would never quite be the same. The death of a child is one of the most traumatic things anyone can go through. Losing a child is the ultimate trauma for a parent, and I realized that in the weeks and months after his death. I realized that no one grieves the same and that we all deal with grief and loss differently. While no one ever totally recovers from the loss of a loved one, over time you get to a point where the pain becomes manageable.

I very quickly learned that losing a child to suicide also made me a member of an exclusive club of which no one wants to be a part. Still, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to speak with several other parents who also lost a child to suicide. I found they were the only people that truly understood the depth of my loss and pain.

Getting back to normal seemed impossible. As a family, we tried suggestions and ideas from anyone and everyone. We tried remodeling the apartment above the garage where Andrew died, but it didn't help, so we ended up moving. We tried to make the anniversary of Andrew's death a day focused on celebrating his life, but it was difficult.

I know saying time heals all wounds is a cliché, but it's true. We needed time to process and deal with the depth of emotions we felt after that day and the days to follow. While I will never forget the day he died, we have found it more effective for us to treat it as any other day.

We reached out to other people who had lost a child to suicide, and they encouraged me to get counseling. This was very good for me as it made me realize that Andrew dying by suicide did not mean that I failed him as a parent. He was ill, in a way that only he knew, and ultimately died because of mental illness.

In my final counseling session, I was told, "you're going to be fine." I said, "how?" I couldn't imagine a day when I wasn't going to be in pain, or when this loss didn't feel crippling. "You're not afraid to talk about it," the counselor told me. "You're not afraid to say he died by suicide, as opposed to committed suicide, which has a violent

connotation. And you're not afraid to say your son was dealing with mental illness." That was the moment that I knew I could channel my grief and sadness into something positive.

Healing is ultimately about the survivors, not the lost. My grief was like a shoebox in a closet that I opened every day, then it became every other day, then once a week, and now I open it only when I need to open it.

Call to Action

I remember the moment I decided to open up to other people about what I was going through. I was sitting in a bar one night, and there was a guy beside me who started a conversation. I'd never met him before in my life, and he asked, "how's the year going for you?" I felt this urge to tell him the whole story. I opened up to a complete stranger about losing my son, and it was an a-ha moment. I realized that there is nothing to be embarrassed about. My son had mental illness and it's a disease, and talking about it was good for me and for the person I was talking to.

I absorbed a lot of information about mental health that first year after Andrew passed. I also learned how suicidal thoughts and mental illness are so taboo that most people keep their suffering hidden, a secret they are embarrassed of and fear disclosing. The stigma of mental illness was so powerful that it kept people from getting help. No other disease, especially one so treatable, was like that.

As I began to heal, I wanted to do more, something more concrete that would fill those hours when my grief was too overwhelming. I wanted to find a way to be proactive and share my story with others. A friend introduced me to the Gracepoint Foundation, and I joined their Board of Directors in May of 2015. This opportunity has allowed me to connect to a special group of people, all with different connections and experiences to mental health and addiction, who wanted to get involved.

Working with the Gracepoint Foundation over the last six years has allowed me to amplify my desire to spread mental health awareness. In 2016, we founded the Andrew Lutes Endowment, and host the Andrew Lutes Golf Outing to help cultivate the endowment and speak to the importance of mental health and suicide awareness. I am incredibly proud of the tremendous amount of financial support we have raised for the endowment, but more importantly the lives we have touched and families we have helped. The income generated from the endowment supports the critical services and programs for children at Gracepoint. If the support from our event or the endowment can save the life of just ONE child, then somehow, someway, Andrew's death makes more sense.

I enjoy the advocacy work I do on my own as well, whether that's supporting those in need in my church community, spreading education and awareness on social media, speaking to groups or reaching out to families who have lost a loved one to suicide. Young people today are under so many pressures and parents need to know the signs of when their kids may be in trouble. I want to provide value to anyone looking to learn more about

mental health and help any parent seeking resources to support their child reaching out for help.

Being so open about my story has allowed me to connect with so many parents over concerns about their children. I'm always happy to share my story, take a call or help direct them to the appropriate resources to navigate issues they are facing with their child. I feel I'm now at a place in my healing where I can spread understanding and hope, and view it as a calling.

Mental illness is a disease, not unlike cancer or heart disease, and if left undiagnosed or untreated, can be fatal. I want people to know that we must continue to educate ourselves on the signs of mental illness so we can be aware of them and prepared to deal with them. Building a community that is supportive of people who want to talk about mental illness removes the shame and encourages people to seek help without fear.

Shortly after Andrew's death, I got a tattoo that says, "everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about. Be kind. Always." It's a reminder to me that sometimes, behind that beautiful smile and the big blue eyes of my son, there was pain. Once we stop being afraid to talk about that pain, we cannot only change lives, we can save them.