

CANAL PURSUIT FOR MENTAL HEALTH

By Clay Williams

In 1980 I was living in student residence at the University of Toronto. Late one evening in March my father called to tell me my brother Ted had died. We were told it had been an accident, but I knew in my heart he had taken his own life. It was confirmed decades later that his suicide note had been intentionally destroyed. He was my hero when we were growing up; very intelligent, full of energy and potential. For decades afterward I would have dreams where I would see Ted on a crowded street and try to shout over the noise of the crowd: "Why?"

I never got an answer.

In 2007 I was living in Kitchener and got a phone call from my younger brother, telling me that another of my brothers, Allan, had died and I needed to go to the funeral in Thunder Bay. He ran a gun shop and had used a handgun to take his own life. I couldn't help thinking that there was something I could have done; in my last conversation with him he told me that all his friends were dying, and I should have seen that as a cry for help.

It wasn't until the summer of 2014 that I really started to put it all together. That was the year that a few connected things happened. There was a lot of media coverage about our first responders and veterans struggling with PTSD and high suicide rates. Actor Robin Williams died by suicide, gathering a lot of media attention. I started a fundraiser for "mental health", and as I studied a little more on the topic it became clear to me that the mental health care system in Canada needs a lot of work, I prefer to think that it's in its infancy and really needs to grow up. But there are many, many people who can't wait until that system is fixed, so I have the feeling that I need to do what I can to raise awareness and funds to help people who are struggling. What if there's something I can do to help someone to make the decision to continue on with their life instead of ending it? What if there's something I can do and I don't do it? So I run, and I organize fun runs to raise funds and awareness. The life of a mental health advocate has been a fulfilling journey with plenty of tearful conversations about loss and strength and hope.