

A DAY IN THE LIFE

In this first-person account, Trauma Intervention Volunteer Kim Higgins describes what the Carlsbad, California, program does – and the tremendous impact such a program can have on individuals in distress. For details on how the program was developed and how it fits in with the community's other emergency response agencies, see page 9.

OF A TIP VOLUNTEER

by Kim Higgins

I'm a Trauma Intervention Volunteer. A day when I'm on call can easily disguise itself as routine in the chaos of the school morning rush. Today the kids are left with just enough time to look for something to do that will end up making us late after all. My eight-year-old daughter, Maggie, wonders if we have any pictures of our wedding. I know she's seen them before but her memory is selective, depending on her interest at the moment. We open the wedding album and my husband, Steve, and I exchange glances over her head. I'm pretty sure he's thinking how much younger we both looked but I'm hoping he won't say it out loud.

We're turning the pages and still stuck in the staged pre-wedding shots when my pager sounds its demanding beep. I look at Steve pleadingly, knowing he's going to have to take the kids to school, a duty he thought he had escaped.

I call dispatch and they tell me they want

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me at a house where an older man has hanged himself and I'm needed to support his wife. I put the phone down and I tell Steve what he already knows: "You have to take them, honey. I have to go. This is serious, they need me."

His quick look tells me, "So, we don't?" I know he's not really mad – he's too easygoing for that and very supportive of all I do connected to the Trauma Intervention

Program. But, as a direct my son, Sam, to get his books and carefully loaded science project out of my car, claiming over his protests that I warned him this might happen, I have a brief feeling of abandoning my own family to run to take care of someone else's.

I hurriedly try to cover all bases, calling out the car window as I back out. "See you at your football game. Don't forget about gymnastics, I love you," and drive a little too fast out of the driveway. I turn on the radio and try to turn off my mind. I watch out for traffic and keep checking my directions, but as I get closer I can't help thinking about the people at the home where I'm needed. Have they been married for many years? As I remember our wedding album left open on the unmade bed, I begin to wonder what has led them to this point. Before I have time to imagine a story to fill in the sparse facts the dispatcher has given

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me, I need to seriously concentrate on arriving within the promised twenty-minute response time. Getting lost on the way to a call is always a fear. Time seems to take on a different quality and every wasted second feels like an added injury.

The name of the street appears as promised by the Thomas Bros. guide, and the sight of the sheriff's car parked in front of the house confirms, without a doubt, that I'm in the right place. The sight of an official vehicle always gives me a jolt of reality. I think back to the confidence-building saying, "Act as if . . . , and you will become" when I realize that the officers who belong to that car actually felt *they* needed *me*. I take a deep breath and don't chance my mind getting too far ahead of me. It's time to do my job. I take a deep breath, walk up to the door and knock gently.

The sheriff's deputy opens the door and before he can give me any details, directs me with a glance to the agitated woman getting up from the living room couch. I remember my long days of training, role-playing imaginary tragedies, and I put my hand on her arm and I speak my line, knowing this woman's answer will be all too real.

"I'm so sorry. What happened?" She grabs my hand and continues holding it as if we've been friends for years, when we don't even know each others' names yet.

She tells me in a dazed, but matter-of-fact way, that she found her husband hanging outside on the back patio when she awoke that morning.

"You know we've been married almost fifty years. He's been acting strange lately but I could never have imagined something like this."

She heads back toward the kitchen and I follow, preparing myself for what I know my eyes will see and my brain will record like my son's computer when he pushes the "save" command. My instincts are right and I cannot avoid the sight of a man hanging, head tilted to the side with what I must have been imagining was a look of surprise left on his face.

I haven't been a T.I.P. volunteer long enough to be used to seeing death in person, and I guess I hope I never will be. I sometimes get a feeling of watching myself through one of those two-way mirrors and I wonder, "Am I really part of this picture?" We stand with the deputies in the kitchen while the man's wife, Jean, is determined to

make us a cup of coffee. I try to accept it graciously even though it's unimaginable but she is obviously frantic for something that feels familiar, something from the routine that has been broken forever.

I ask her if there is someone she should call, does she have any children? The reality of what has happened begins to crowd in and I help her dial, her shaking hands unable to connect with the push button numbers. I feel like a traitor when I hand the phone back to her as I hear it ringing, knowing the terrible shock that waits for her son who will answer.

I consider breaking the news myself to spare her, but she seems ready to handle it. Again, I pull one of the most important lessons from our training: Let her do what she can. This is her life and I need to help her find the strength to take each painful step. I can only imagine what her son is feeling as she blurts the news, "Well, he did it. Your father killed himself."

I know that the first domino of the terrible news will probably push itself through the rest of the family. Soon, her son and his wife arrive and there are two more who need whatever I can give. Jean introduces me and I offer to screen the phone calls so that they can be together.

The medical examiner arrives and I quietly occupy the family while he performs his detailed investigation and removes the body. A predictable relief follows when that is accomplished and I know it won't be long before my job there is finished. We talk for awhile but I begin to separate, referring to information I'll be leaving for them when I go and getting phone numbers so I can call them the next day.

It's always a strange feeling to say goodbye to people you've shared such pain with during the first few hours of any tragedy or serious loss. When all pretenses are dropped and you bring your hand to hold, a bridge is created. And, for me, that's what this job is all about. We cross that bridge together to a place where, hopefully, a strength will be found.

I hug Jean and look into her eyes before I leave. I see a glimpse of that strength. I push the "save" command, on purpose this time, and I know I will have it to take with me on my next call.

