

"If we've saved one person, that's enough."

MASK magazine Winter 2014
Kappa Psi Pharmaceutical Fraternity

It's a short, simple sentiment by his wife, Peggy, that has served as Patrick Tharp's mantra since he founded Pharmacists Preventing Suicides (PPS[®]) more than 10 years ago. Tharp '61/'62, Ph.D., R.Ph., president and owner of Melling Group, an international pharmacy consulting group, was compelled to start PPS after his youngest daughter, Tricia, took her own life in her early 30s.

On October 23, Tharp spoke to a crowd of dozens of students, faculty, and staff at a lecture held in the Cartwright Student Center. He shared that besides primary care physicians, pharmacists are most often the healthcare professionals to see depressed patients who may be at risk for suicides. Since pharmacists dispense medications for depression and other mental health disorders, pharmacists are in a position to identify when someone has major depression or a similar disorder. However, most pharmacists in the U.S. have received no formal education or training at all in suicide prevention, even though suicides are now the 10th leading cause of death in America. Knowing the warning signs or symptoms of suicidality, often seen in patients with major depression, can help a pharmacist save someone's life. "We want to help save as many people as we can," Tharp said.

Tharp's youngest daughter was diagnosed with major depression when she was 12 years old, and her condition only got worse as she grew older. After graduating from high school, Tricia was dismissed from the University of Mississippi during her sophomore year after repeatedly not showing up for class. After she moved back home to St. Louis, Tharp and Peggy helped Tricia, putting her up in an apartment in the Central West End. "We sustained her, but she just didn't do well for years," Tharp said. "She was very severely depressed."

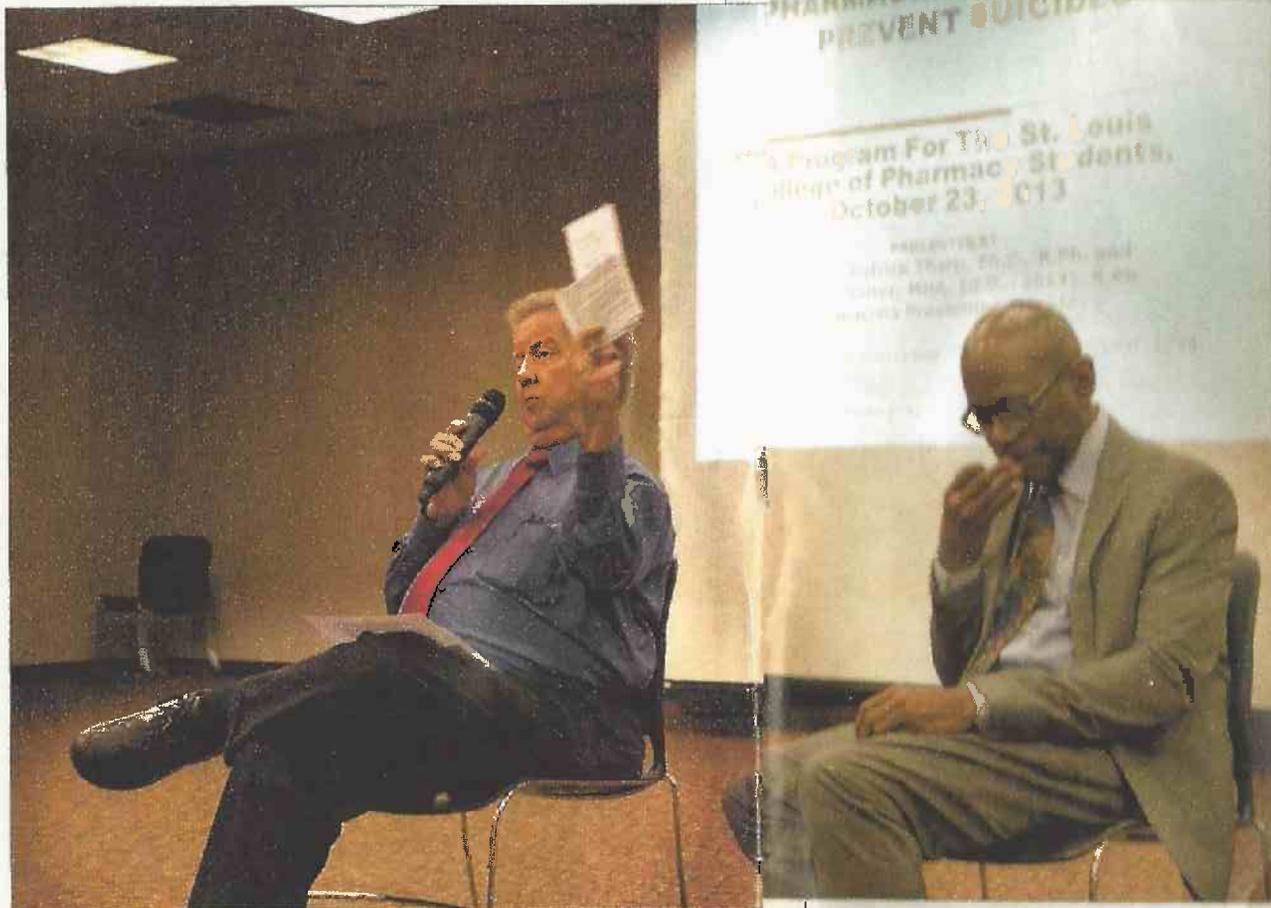
Tharp said Peggy would talk to Tricia at least once a week. "One week we called, and she didn't call back," he said. "She didn't call back the second day or the third day either, so Peggy said, 'You better go and see her.' I went, and when I got to her apartment building, a hearse from the coroner's office was there.

"I just knew it was her," he said.

Tricia had taken her own life by overdosing on six different medications prescribed for depression. Tharp said that his youngest daughter had "stockpiled" the medications and had taken hundreds at once.

At first, the tragedy sent Tharp into a deep depression. He said he lazed around the house for six or seven months. But he was also researching suicides, their causes, warning signs, and, most important, how to prevent them. "I learned a lot and found out that I had really not known much about suicide at all," he said.

Tharp called approximately 30 of his former STLCOF students and asked them what they knew about suicide prevention. The overwhelming response was "nothing." So Tharp set out to educate pharmacists and pharmacy students about suicide prevention.



Through PPS, Tharp's goal is to integrate suicide prevention information and education into the curriculum of every pharmacy school in the country. He has taught a seminar on suicide prevention at STLCOF a number of times in the last three years. He has also presented a similar seminar at the University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Pharmacy and the University of Mississippi School of Pharmacy. Tharp says at least six more schools in Illinois are currently interested in scheduling a presentation.

Tharp knows he still has a long way to go before suicide prevention is being taught at every pharmacy school in the country, but he's taking it one school at a time. He has also used continuing education to educate practicing pharmacists about the prevention of suicides.

In the 10 years since Tharp founded PPS, nine pharmacists have joined the cause, including fellow STLCOF alum Robert Salter '70, R.Ph., MHA, president-elect of the Alumni Association's board of directors. Salter often presents the seminars with Tharp, including the one recently

Patrick Tharp, Ph.D., R.Ph., founder and president of Pharmacists Preventing Suicides (PPS), gives a lecture to a group of student pharmacists at St. Louis College of Pharmacy while Robert Salter, R.Ph., MHA, vice president of PPS, looks on. (Photo by Greg Katski)

given at the College. After Tharp shared the personal story of his daughter's suicide and explained the origin of PPS, Salter spoke about the vital role pharmacists can play in preventing suicides and discussed the ways to identify, assess, and refer at-risk patients.

For more information on suicide prevention and training from PPS and other major sources, please visit <http://www.pharmacist-preventingsuicides.com/>. ■