

# Obituary

## Openness

### Deacon's candid words following the death of his daughter are raising awareness about mental illness and suicide

It was the best thing he had ever written...and the worst.

Just hours after he and his wife Ruth had learned of the tragic death of their daughter, Katie, who had taken her own life after a 12-year battle with severe depression, Deacon Ed Shoener sat down to begin the tortuous task of composing his "baby girl's" obituary.

Eschewing the standard format for announcing the death of a loved one, the Catholic Church deacon decided to turn the most difficult time in his life into a teaching moment on the unsettling subjects of mental illness and suicide.

He began quite candidly: "Kathleen 'Katie' Marie Shoener, 29, fought bipolar disorder since 2005, but she finally lost the battle on Wednesday (Aug. 3) to suicide in Lewis Center, Ohio. Katie was born in Scranton and is the daughter of Deacon Edward R. and Ruth Shoener of Scranton. She was a graduate of Scranton High School, received her bachelor of science in business from Penn State University and recently her MBA from Ohio State University..."

The gripping words that followed got the attention of not only the entire community, but of those

from around the nation and other parts of the world:

"So often people who have a mental illness are known as their illness. People say that 'she is bipolar' or 'he is schizophrenic.' Over the coming days as you talk to people about this, please do not use that phrase. People who have cancer are not cancer, those with diabetes are not diabetes."

Ed calls his words of candor and truth "divinely inspired," as he credits the Holy Spirit for using him as an instrument to enlighten so many.

The unusual obituary prompted not only a huge outpouring of sympathy, but inspiration for so many other families ravaged by mental illness.

"I have had so many people come up to me and talk about their personal struggles with mental illness or the struggles of a loved one with the illness," shares Ed, who ministers as a permanent deacon to the parish community of St. Peter's Cathedral in downtown Scranton. "It is (common) and it is in every family. We do not need to treat it as a rare and unique illness."

The deacon relates that most are coming to the understanding

that mental illness is not a "character flaw or a sign of personal weakness or lack of strength."

"Mental illness is not demonic possession," he continues. "It is an illness just like cancer or another illness. It needs to be treated by competent psychiatrists, psychologists and other doctors."

Deacon Shoener continues to stress that the Christian community needs to embrace and comfort those around us suffering from mental illness.

"We need to end the prejudice and discrimination that people with mental illness have to face every day," he says. "Some, like my daughter Katie, suffered in relative silence, and you would not have known by talking to her or seeing her that she was so ill. For people like Katie, it would be wonderful if they could feel they have the freedom to talk openly about their illness without the fear that they will be judged and looked down upon."

St. John Paul II reflected on the topic at two separate international conferences for health care workers that specifically addressed illnesses of the Human Mind. "Whoever suffers from mental illness *always* bears God's image and likeness in themselves," the late pontiff offered. "It is everyone's duty to make an active response; our actions must show that mental illness does not create insurmountable distances, nor prevent relations of true Christian charity with those who are its victims. Indeed it should inspire a particularly attentive attitude..."

Calling for the Church to always serve as a welcoming, embracing community for those afflicted with psychological disorders, the Catholic Bishops of New York State issued a statement in 2014, titled "For I Am Lonely and Afflicted," in response to the needs of mentally ill persons.

It reads, in part: "We have no better example of how to respond



**Kathleen  
"Katie" Shoener  
1986-2016**

to those with mental illness than that of Jesus Christ. Time and again throughout the New Testament, we encounter our Lord's mercy toward this population. The curing of this affliction...was a central part of Jesus' healing ministry. Always, we (see) Him engage these individuals in the same way he would engage anyone else, with tenderness. We are called to do no less."

As in the case of Katie Shoener, mental illness can be deadly. Suicide is the cause of death for people with serious mental illness far too often, says Ed, citing statistics that reveal, on average, nearly 115 people die from suicide every day in the United States — more than 43,000 per year.

"Death by suicide is not a choice that is made with a healthy mind. Mental illnesses make people think irrationally," the deacon relates. "The darkness and pain of severe depression is so overwhelming that they simply want it to end. They don't want to die, but they can't stand the overwhelming pain of being alive."

Those left behind by a suicide invariably are stricken with tremendous feelings of shame and guilt, and, as Ed stresses, are all the more in need of comfort and support in their time of grief. "We need to help them know that their loved one's death to suicide is nothing to be ashamed of," he says.

The tragic death of his daughter has also led the ordained clergyman to shed light on the Catholic Church's teaching on suicide, which does not condemn those who have committed suicide to eternal damnation.

With respect to the subject, Ed points to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which states: "Grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide. We should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives. By ways known to Him alone, God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance. The Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives." (Paragraphs 2282, 2283)

The Shoeners, along with a multitude of other families, can take solace in the Church's understanding of how mental illness can result in suicide and its belief that God always shows mercy to those who have died because of it.

*Katie Shoener would have turned 30 years old on Halloween. To honor her memory and raise awareness of mental illness, her family and friends have organized a 5K Mental Illness Awareness Walk/Run — lovingly dubbed "5Kate" — for Sunday, Oct. 30, at Veterans Memorial Stadium at Scranton High School. Proceeds from the event, which will also include Halloween activities for all ages, will benefit the National Alliance on Mental Illness. For more information and registration, go to [5kate.org](http://5kate.org).*



**Young Katie with her parents,  
Ed and Ruth Shoener**