

Phoenix Summit Focuses on Preventing Suicide in the Construction Industry

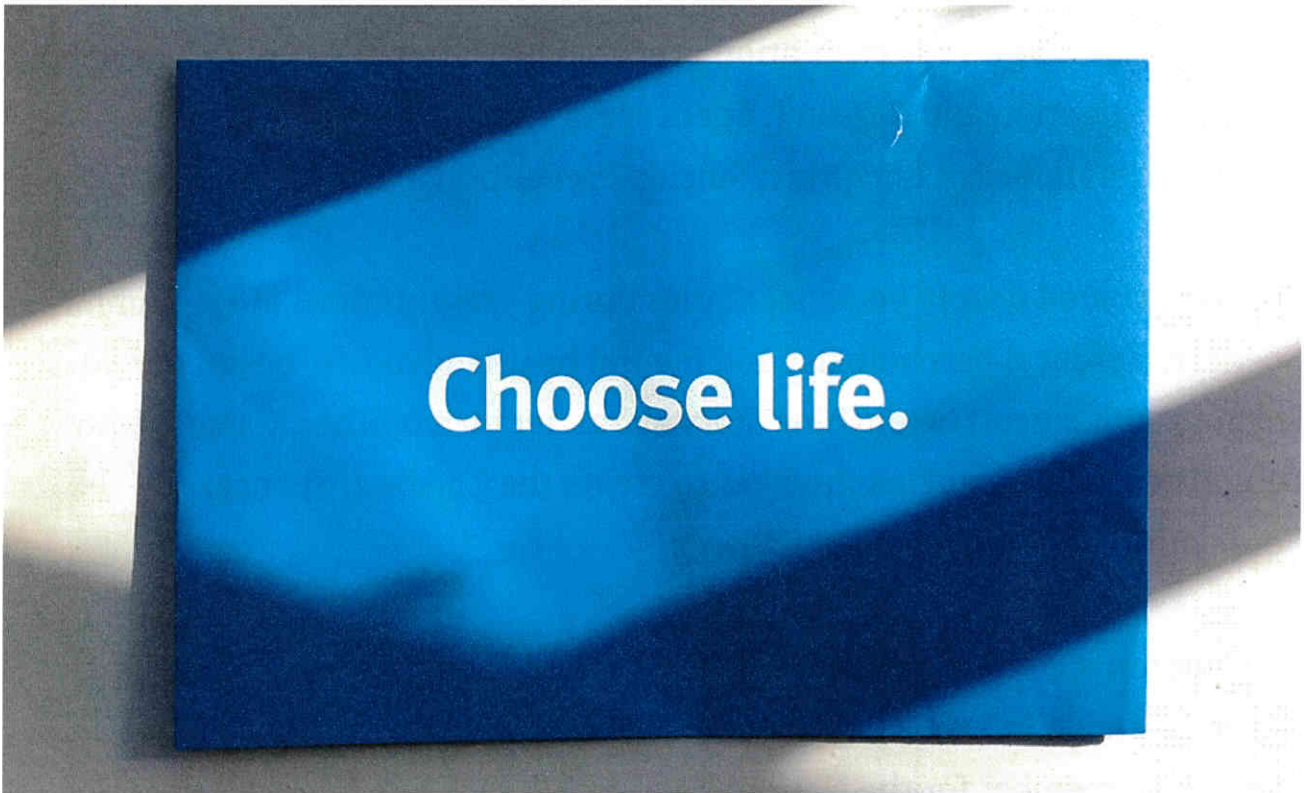


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John Guzzon

In an attempt to shatter the mental health stigma that plagues so many individuals at work and at home, the Construction Financial Management Association (CFMA) Valley of the Sun Chapter organized a half-day “Suicide Prevention Summit” at the Phoenix Country Club on April 7. The first ever stateside, the summit brought together

construction industry CEOs, CFOs, Human Resource Professionals and Safety and Risk Managers in an effort to prevent suicide and bring awareness to the ongoing, often silent struggles of men in the workforce.

With a keynote speech by Sally Spencer, the event brought to light some surprising statistics about suicide, including that the construction industry ranked in the top nine industries at risk for suicide.

Additionally, suicide is the second leading cause of death for men between the ages of 25 to 54 in the U.S., men in high stakes occupations such as heavy construction equipment supervisors are 1.5 times more likely to die from suicide, according to a presentation prepared by National Action Alliance For Suicide Prevention and Carson J. Spencer Foundation entitled “A Construction Industry Blueprint: Suicide Prevention in the Workplace.”

Speakers shared deeply personal stories during presentations at the summit. Spencer, a clinical psychologist and mental health advocate, began her keynote with a heart-wrenching story about her own brother, Carson, who committed suicide and inspired her to create the Carson J. Spencer Foundation to help prevent suicide.

The summit’s goal is “to build... [a] world class caring culture,” says Cal Beyer, Lakeside Industries Director of Risk Management and executive committee member for the National Action Alliance For Suicide Prevention. He goes on to say that having an industry job makes it difficult to talk about mental health as many workers believe admitting to depression or a mental illness will destroy their careers. Beyer also notes the absence of discussion on the topic sometimes feels like, “A wall of silence surrounded by a moat of shame.”

Construction workers are in need, Beyer asserts. “That’s why we’re here. It’s sobering because we have statistics... we are giving companies the resources to make a difference.” Some of the more sobering statistics include that every

thirteen minutes someone commits suicide and every one minute someone attempts suicide.

Spencer agrees with that contention, but notes that “Statistics are merely aggregated numbers with the tears wiped away.”

“Most people don’t tell this story,” Spencer says. “That’s why I do. If you keep it secret, you don’t get answers.”

To help get discussions started, she created mantherapy.org, a website aimed at the men with tips and support for men who want to take the best care of themselves mentally. She shows a clip from a video with Dr. Rich Mahogany teaching men how to breathe... by using expletives.

The video brings up important points with humor, making it easier to digest and, more importantly, more accessible for men to watch without feeling embarrassed. Plus, it offers some helpful mental health tips.

“We want guys to come in and self-assess on mantherapy.org... because mental health really matters for everyone,” Spencer says. She stresses that it’s important to meet men where they need it and where they are, both physically (mantherapy.org advertises in bars) but also emotionally (It’s funny, but the humor is helpful). Otherwise, the message might get lost.

“I am angry that people who have very treatable disorders also have to go through social stigma,” she says. But Spencer believes that through her Carson J. Spencer Foundation, mantherapy.org and summits like the one held in Phoenix, the culture is changing. She sees “a beacon of hope.”

“It’s okay to be more vulnerable,” she says. “This is a story about hope.”

Beyer says the mere fact that this is becoming a topic of discussion in the construction industry is a major step forward. But that the industry must

continue to break down the stigma of mental health and help construction companies build a caring culture that includes mental health.

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