



# A Hero Among Us

How Monique  
Yashinskie made  
mental health  
accessible for  
everyone

**By: Jennifer Layman**

One of the most famous quotes of all time is from Mahatma Gandhi: "Be the change you wish to see in the world." Most of us would have a hard time imagining what doing that would actually look like, as inspired by Gandhi's words as we might be. And to be someone who leads change, whether you choose it or it chooses you, well, you better have some kind of thick skin to handle that.

Monique Yashinskie became the 'change' she wanted to see in the world. It wasn't what she set out to do in her life. It wasn't a role she had trained for or prepared for in any way. But someone had to do it, and she became that someone. This is her story.

Officially, Monique is the Administrator at the Robbie Dean Family Counselling Centre, but that title is barely appropriate for her actual role there. As the name suggests, it's a place that offers counselling to anyone who needs it. Their niche is that they operate like a medical walk-in clinic - but instead of physical help, they offer mental help. People

come to the Robbie Dean Centre for any number of reasons: stress, anxiety, grief, or relationships, to name a few. In March 2017, the Robbie Dean Centre took 210 phone calls from people looking for help. They saw 166 people in their clinics and they helped 45 others with grief support. They have clients ranging in age from 8 to 76.

And one more thing: the services are free. Free counselling. No wait list.

"Nobody pays for our service," says Monique, "and we never turn someone away."

That is the change Monique wanted to see in the world because it might have helped her son, and the other eight local teenagers that died by suicide in 2011.

The Robbie Dean Centre is named for Monique's son: Robert Ruben Armand "Robbie" Dean. Robbie took his life on August 19, 2011. As Monique tells the story, they were a normal, happy family at Thanksgiving, and they were standing at Robbie's gravesite nine months later. A lot can happen in nine months, but in Monique's case, a lot can also *not* happen.

Robbie was a kid who got along with everyone. He once took \$40 out of his bank account to pay a fellow classmate's basketball fee because that child's parents couldn't afford it. Robbie defended that decision to his mom saying, "The team needs him to play." Robbie had awesome grades, a good job in which he was a definite leader, and he was in the reserves. For 16 years, he was this great kid. For nine months, he was someone else.

Monique still doesn't know what caused her son to take his life, but she plays the "what if" game from time to time, wondering if she could have taken different actions to get a different result. She'll never have an answer, and she accepts that in a way that only she can as Robbie's mom. But she also has a perspective that resonates with a lot of people who find help at the Robbie Dean Centre: she's been through it. Nobody tells Monique that she doesn't understand. They know she does. And that's what gives the Robbie Dean Centre instant credibility - its leader is someone who gets it.

When Monique and her family were

looking for help for Robbie, they did everything they should have done. They went to their family doctor who prescribed medication for Robbie to help with his depression. It didn't work. They sought out youth counselling, but Robbie was 16 years old - not a youth as per the parameters of that program. So Monique and her husband, Steve, signed up for a parenting course. It

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took six months to get off the ground, and when it did, the course was filled with young parents struggling with new babies, and who were mandated to be there through social programs. They did the course anyway.

They also got Robbie into CHEO after his first and second suicide attempts. The counsellors there worked with him alone, and when they brought Monique in to hear their thoughts, she was awe struck. They had made statements based on what Robbie wanted them to know, not the truth. As Monique corrected the counsellors on the facts, Robbie, sitting beside her, grew more and more angry. She wasn't going to let him get away with not being truthful.

"The drive home that day was pretty awful," she says.

Monique wrote a letter to CHEO with a suggestion that their counselling include the parent so that 'truths' can be confirmed. CHEO invited her to be part of a conference call to discuss that further, and she obliged.

There would be two more suicide attempts before Robbie decided he was going to spend the summer in Nova Scotia with his dad. Monique thought that might not be a bad idea - maybe a change of scenery would do him some good. She had prepped Robbie's father on their son's depression and she explained the medication he was to take. On June 20, 2011, Robbie left for Nova Scotia. It was the last day Monique would ever see her son alive.

Monique kept in touch with Robbie's

grandmother, her ex-husband's mother, who lived beside Robbie's dad. They spoke once a week. She also sent parcels once a week. She remembers the grandmother saying how happy Robbie was - he was eating well and sleeping well and even had a part-time job there. Monique was relieved.

"I was truly happy that he was doing so well," she says.

On August 19, 2011, at three o'clock in the morning, Monique received a call from a Nova Scotia constable. "Are you Robbie



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Dean's mother?" he asked. "Yes," she said. "Ma'am," said the constable, "I have some very sad news for you."

Robbie had committed suicide.

Robbie had accessed a gun from his grandmother's house, claiming it was to shoot squirrels that were causing a nuisance on the property.

Monique knows now that the dramatically improved behaviour is a 'red flag.'

"If someone seems to be almost cured overnight, you need to be questioning that because it is not normal," she says. "Robbie tried four times to commit suicide here and he wasn't successful because his support system was too strong - family, friends, peers. In Nova Scotia, he was in control."

Within seven hours of that phone call, Monique, Steve, and Robbie's brother Justin, were at the grandmother's house in Halifax. They made arrangements for Robbie to be cremated, and they brought his ashes home. They had a service for him at Holy Name Church in Pembroke.

"I think I hugged every single kid that went through that line," says Monique.

A month later, Monique asked a counsellor from CHEO to come and speak in Pembroke about teen suicide as it was so rampant that year. He came, and Monique was interviewed on CTV News about the event and the issues in the region.

"It was the first time I was ever on telev-

ision," she says, "and it was only a month after Robbie died, so I was still pretty raw."

The Daily Observer wrote an article on Monique's experience of losing her son, and a local counsellor read it. He asked Monique if she would tell her story to an organization called West Champlain, in hopes they would see a focus on mental health as being something they could include in their practice. She agreed.

"I wanted to give my problem to someone else and have them fix it," she says, about the area needing more mental health services that were readily accessible.

But, Jeffrey Weatherhill, the Director of the West Champlain

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group, felt that Monique should be the one to fix it. It took a lot of convincing, but she agreed, starting as a volunteer. After several months she told Weatherhill she just couldn't continue. She had a full time job, a family and she just didn't have any more time to give. Weather-hill had a solution, "What if I pay you?"

To this day, Monique still can't believe she left a full-time job, with benefits and a pension, to become the Administrator of the Robbie Dean Centre. She remembers having the conversation with her husband.

"I said that I could leave my job and this could all flop," she says. "And he said two things. First, if you don't do it you'll always wonder if you should have done it. Second, if you get the carpet pulled out from underneath you, we'll get through it."

So, she took a leap of faith.

"When Robbie died, I knew I could either be mad at God or I could fall on my knees," she said. "Faith was never something I actually lived. I was raised Catholic and I knew what to say and when to stand and when to sit. That was all. But I felt like there was nothing else I could do and I couldn't handle it. I had to accept what happened and it had to have a purpose."

In her new role, the first person she

reached out to was Tom Sidney, someone CHEO had thought would be a good person in Robbie's safety plan at school. Tom had not been hired by the school as a counsellor, so he was not permitted to have that role, even though Robbie really connected with him. Tom shared Monique's core belief that there were too many barriers for people who needed help so they started brainstorming on what the Centre could look like.

They knew what they didn't want. They were not going to be another 1-800 number and they were not going to be a "come sit in Emerg for 14 hours" model either, she said. They wanted to be like a walk-in clinic - short waits, immediate service and no cost. They pitched their idea to the Rotary Clubs of Renfrew County and the Rotary Clubs gave them \$14,000 to get going.

"The Rotary Clubs basically believed in a vision," says Monique. "They were the seed funding that got us to where we are today."

The Robbie Dean Centre officially opened on June 5, 2013 with locations in Pembroke and Renfrew.

criteria. The Robbie Dean Centre doesn't duplicate any service; instead, they offer a service where none existed - the service of immediate, no cost, mental health support. They are built on short-term care which handles most issues, and for individuals needing more support, they help someone access those services. If it takes six months

experience, "mistakes" as she calls them. When she is asked to share her story, she shares her "mistakes."

First, she admits that she bought into the stigma of mental health. She thought people with mental health problems came from poor backgrounds or abusive and addictive families and that they weren't from "normal"



Monique and her husband, Steve, at home with Daisy and Mustang.

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Today, they have four locations, one full-time and two part-time counsellors and one volunteer. After four years, they remain entirely funded by donations from the community. They earn \$0 from government.

"The biggest strength of the Robbie Dean Centre is the community," says Monique. "I do one fundraiser a year. Approximately 30 more are done by other people. What makes us who we are, are the people supporting us."

Some people think the Robbie Dean Centre shouldn't have opened and that it competes with other mental health resources in the area. But that's a tough argument to make to a mother who sought out resources to save her child and was met with wait lists and

to get those services, the person stays with the Centre until that bridge is available. It doesn't matter their history. It doesn't matter their age. It doesn't matter their needs.

"You're not going to get turned away here," says Monique. "That's what happened to us and I'll never do that to someone."

Not surprisingly, it's making a difference. Since 2013, 152 suicidal people have come through their doors. Their counsellors referred nine immediately to the hospital. They helped the rest.

Despite those numbers, the majority of people coming to the Robbie Dean Centre are not suicidal. Monique says that most people have stress or anxiety and are feeling overwhelmed in their life; they are seeking help before it becomes a mental health issue. In their short existence, they not only handle immediate mental health concerns, but have also inspired people to seek them out to prevent mental health issues from growing.

"At the end of every month I tabulate our numbers, and when I see those numbers, it make my heart beat a little faster," she says. "It still shocks me. I mean, it was so unnecessary to have to struggle for help for a whole year. There is no need for that. That's just crazy. These numbers really validate that for me."

Through time, and in sitting around the table with the counselling staff, Monique has learned a few things about her own

families like hers.

Second, she thought depression was something that could be treated like the flu. Take some meds and get some rest and you'll get over it. She minimized it.

Third, she felt as though she did not educate herself enough about depression. Had she done that, she would not have minimized its impact.

And finally, she believes she was not a strong enough advocate for Robbie. If she wasn't allowed to be in the counselling sessions with him, she feels she should have made her own appointment with the counsellor so she could talk about the situation and he could just listen.

"I didn't understand the seriousness of what we were into," she says, "and I had denial because I thought normal families don't go through this. But it's a story that too many people are living. It is a real story. Robbie was a real kid."

What is also real, is that if Monique Yashinskie was any less courageous than she is, the Robbie Dean Centre would not exist. She has shared her most profound loss with the community, in hopes that we will never have to endure it themselves. This woman is a gift to the world.