

Bancroft council receives update on Baseball for Dad campaign

By Nate Smelle

Bancroft council recently received an update on the Baseball for Dad campaign from its founder, mental health advocate Louri Snider at their Oct. 9 meeting. During her presentation, Snider explained to council how in response to the unthinkable tragedy, she set out on a mission to honour her son, Mark, by launching the Baseball for Dad campaign. After an unbearable battle with mental illness, Mark, a loving husband and father of two, ended his life on May 5, 2019. Now, through her efforts with the campaign, Snider aims to break the silence around mental health, create awareness, and reduce the stigma that often prevents people from seeking help. In doing so, Snider told council she is not only honouring her son, but also sending out a clarion call for society to change how it talks about mental illness. To help raise awareness of how those battling mental illness often suffer in silence, Snider shared with council her son's story. "He loved the outdoors, hunting and fishing, baseball, playing with Tonka trucks," Snider said. "We often joked that his dream job was working at the township, and he finally, eventually got to play with the big Tonka trucks. That's what he always wanted to do. He loved hunting and fishing and four-wheeling. He loved splitting wood and selling wood and cutting lawns for the neighbours and always helping people out. Mark went on to marry the love of his life, and have two beautiful children. He used to say he had it all. He had the had a family, a house his dream job, and his dogs because he raised blue tick dog so he felt he had it all. However, beneath the surface, Snider said Mark struggled. She said his journey with mental health challenges became more apparent in 2018 after he experienced a severe panic attack. Although he initially sought medical help for what he believed was a heart attack, she said he was reluctant to continue treatment due to the stigma attached to mental health issues. This reluctance was compounded by a challenging period that included the loss of his home in a fire. After the fire, she said Mark, along with his wife, and children moved in with her. It was during this time, she said that his mental health began to deteriorate further. Despite his efforts to seek help and try various treatments, Snider said Mark continued to suffer. "Unfortunately not all meds work for everybody. Sometimes they take eight weeks to try, but then if they don't work then you have to try another one; and sometimes it's a course of six to seven cycles of those medications, before you find the right one. So he was feeling like a burden. He didn't want to go get help because he didn't want people to think he was crazy? Mark went from someone who woke up every morning at five o'clock, helped get his children ready for school, and kissed them goodbye; [someone] who loved to work, and worked hard, and was with his dogs afterwards training them, and with the kids teaching them baseball; loved four-wheeling and anything outdoors, camping, and just loved life, to somebody who some days couldn't get out of bed." Snider explained further how mental illness clouded her son's perception, causing him to believe that he was a burden to those he loved. Noting how it was this distorted sense of reality often referred to as "flip brain," eventually led him to the devastating decision to end his life, she said, "He truly believed that everybody was better off without him, which you know is completely untrue as he couldn't have been more loved." Snider continued: "It's a horrible disease, and much like cancer and many other diseases, and those battles are fought hard. We watched Mark fight hard and go to appointments, and try to get to appointments, and you know try to be there for his his family and loved ones; and, like with other illnesses he lost that battle? We've learned that mental illness doesn't discriminate. It can affect anyone, and that was that was a huge eye opener for us. In the end we decided since we can't bring him back, and we we can't change things, but we can take the knowledge that we've learned from this, and, moving forward create that awareness to let people know they're not alone." Following Mark's death, Snider and her family felt compelled to share his story. They believed that by talking openly about his struggles, they could help others who were dealing with similar issues, and, at the same time, hopefully prevent families from suffering in silence. In August 2019, they launched the Baseball for Dad Facebook page and website, sharing Mark's story with the world. Within the first month, the campaign received over a thousand emails from individuals expressing their struggles or offering their condolences. This overwhelming response made it clear to Snider that the need for mental health awareness was far greater than she had ever imagined. The Baseball for Dad campaign focuses on five main initiatives: Mark's Buddy Bench initiative, the Kindness Moose program, the Awareness One Glove at a Time program, the Go Green for Mental Health campaign, and the MARK24 clothing line. Each of these initiatives carries forward Mark's memory while addressing different aspects of mental health awareness and kindness. The Awareness One Glove at a Time initiative involves placing baseball gloves in locations around the world. Each glove represents Mark's love for the sport and serves as a symbol of hope. The gloves come with a card explaining the campaign and encouraging those who find them to visit the Baseball for Dad website to share their own stories or read about others' experiences. Snider's family places at least one glove each month, with over 256 gloves distributed worldwide in the past five years. Speaking to the effectiveness of this initiative, Snider reflected on one story that came in after they

placed a glove near Mark's favourite ride at Canada's Wonderland. Acknowledging how the glove was found by a veteran struggling with PTSD, who was there reluctantly for his children, she explained how the glove gave him the strength to continue with his day. Designed to promote kindness, friendship, and inclusivity, the Buddy Bench initiative places benches in various communities to honour Mark's memory. While the first bench was installed at the Mayo Community Centre in June 2020, Snider said there are now 25 benches in 20 communities. Expressing her gratitude to RJK Welding for their contribution in designing and building the benches, she said each year the company generously donates one bench to support the campaign. Describing what was a particularly moving moment for the family, Snider said one of the benches was even placed at the Baseball Hall of Fame on the anniversary of Mark's death. The Kindness Moose program, which aims to inspire kindness by recognizing children who exemplify compassionate behaviour, awards children who serve as a model for others through their acts of kindness. Noting that the program is currently active in three schools, Snider said it originated from hearing about Mark's many quiet acts of kindness. We had one person who gave us \$15,000 that Mark had given them when they were going through hard times; and they had got the money back and gave it to us. We had people talk about him stopping and shoveling them out, and piling their firewood and all these things that he wouldn't take money for all the time. Although we always knew he was a kind, giving person, we didn't realize the extent of things he would do and not even share with us or let us know. So, the Kindness Moose program we have in schools currently, but also when people reach out to us we will give them random to children who are inspiring kindness in a positive way just to encourage and teach a model of kindness. I truly believe that it's something we all need a little bit more of in our lives, because we never know what the person next to us is going through. Like Baseball for Dad's other initiatives, the Go Green campaign is also dedicated to promoting mental health awareness. Snider said it is meant to send a clear message that mental health matters, and that it is okay not to be okay. Furthermore, she said the campaign encourages the public to wear green to show support for mental health awareness and to push for societal changes, such as reduced wait times for mental health services. Snider said it is also intended to create conversations and normalize discussions about mental health. To expand the reach of this message, Snider said Baseball for Dad's MARK24 clothing line, features hats, shirts, and other items that are sold at cost, with no profit being made from Mark's memory. When it comes to all of Baseball for Dad's initiatives, she explained to council that their primary goal is to raise awareness, spread kindness, and remove the stigma associated with mental health issues. Following Snider's presentation Bancroft's Mayor Paul Jenkins thanked her for updating council on the Baseball for Dad campaign, stating, "Thank you very much. You share this story with us every year and every year we learn something new. We appreciate the work you and your family and friends are doing to bring awareness to this topic that as you say, nobody talks about but many people do suffer from."