

Emails from the edge

After his recovery, Kenneth Hemmerick set up a website to help others battling suicidal feelings.

"I try to let them know that even if they're feeling depressed at the time, it's something that does pass," the Montreal artist said.

"And talk to somebody – whether it's a suicide prevention line, a therapist, a trusted family friend – because talking really does help."

Following is a sampling from the thousands of emails Hemmerick has received:

I have a really hard story to tell and I don't think I could tell you right now because it would hurt me more. I know I need help if you could please just email me back.

I am a 15-year-old girl who was about ready to kill myself, but the only thing that stopped me was God. I read that if you kill yourself, you will go to hell. I have had this problem of killing myself for a long while – ever since I was in second grade.

I'm 23. I am an A+ student and have an annual allowance of more than \$100,000. It is ironic that I am contemplating suicide. Most people would think that I have it made.

I have two children. They are what keeps me from doing it. You're right, the more I think about it, the more normal and plausible it seems. I only want the pain to stop for me and everyone who loves me.

It's strange how one moment you are as happy as can be and the next you become so sad and depressed. It feels like you are drowning in a sea of strangers and you are fighting against the current to survive. I feel like this so often inside. All I want is to lay down and die.

Thank you for your kind words. ... I'm not about to do the deed today, but I've been closer to doing it today than any other day. I will take your advice and call a hotline.

To get to Hemmerick's Suicide Prevention Help site, go to www.suicidepreventionhelp.com

Man who learned to beat back the impulse to end it all gives much credit to a psychiatrist who helped him understand he was gay, a little at a time

Moving beyond suicide

"It was sort of a progressive awareness, a sort of gradual understanding that maybe my life is worth something – to me at least."
— Montreal artist Kenneth Hemmerick.

DEBBIE PARKES
THE GAZETTE

Once upon a time – and for a long time – Kenneth Hemmerick wanted to die. And he just about succeeded.

This week is Suicide Prevention Week in Quebec – a fitting time, we thought, to tell Hemmerick's story.

It's a story of strength and recovery – one that Hemmerick hopes will encourage others battling suicidal demons to do what it takes to get better.

Hemmerick, 51, was given up at birth and grew up in foster homes.

As a child, he was frequently rejected and mistreated – by caregivers and other children. He remembers being beaten with a clothesline, and once, at about age 5, trying to hang himself from a tie rack.

Among the issues he struggled with was confusion over his sexuality – Hemmerick is gay.

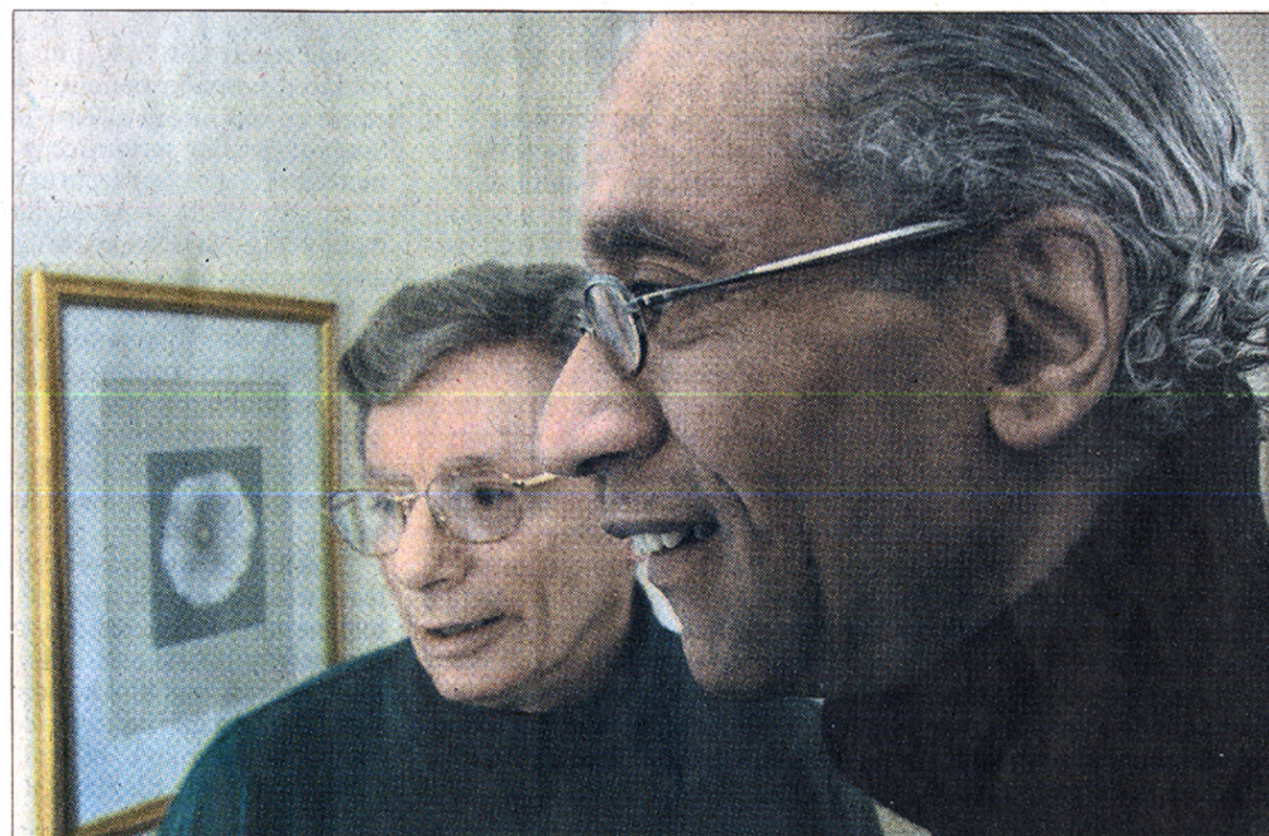
"I just couldn't imagine myself being gay. I wanted to be a good person, and if you're gay, then 'you're not a good person.'"

A refrain of hopelessness played over in his head: "I wasn't wanted, I was given up – all that sort of stuff. When you get into that negative thinking, it's so easy to keep in that spiral of negative thinking."

More than once he fought the urge to jump in front of a métro or onto the Décarie Expressway, he said.

He married at 21. Over the next years, he went through some horrible bouts of depression.

"We loved each other very much. ... But there was so much



Richard Arless Jr. THE GAZETTE
Harry Turnbull (left) is the partner of Kenneth Hemmerick, who helps suicidal people through his website.

stuff I had to work out."

When Hemmerick was about 30, his wife found some gay men's magazines Hemmerick had hidden on a top shelf. She left, taking their two sons, their dog and two cats.

A few months after that, Hemmerick swallowed about 120 pills.

Hemmerick explained: "You step over a line where you think, 'I was never wanted in the world. I'm not wanted now, I won't be wanted in the future, and therefore, it's OK.'"

Luckily, a friend knew that Hemmerick was going through difficult times. Worried because she hadn't heard from him for several days, she went to his apartment.

Hemmerick had been unconscious for 1½ days.

It was some time after that that he determined to get better.

"I would like to say it came to me in a flash of light. It didn't."

But gradually, his views about the meaning of his life shifted.

He gives much credit to a psychiatrist, who, among other things, got Hemmerick to accept that he was gay, a little bit at a time. "He was fantastic."

But Hemmerick also came up with techniques of his own.

He'd paint, he'd write music. He'd listen to motivational tapes. He'd write encouraging notes to himself and post them throughout his apartment.

"Anything positive that I could bring into my life, I did," Hemmerick said.

And he also paid careful attention to what he was thinking.

One innovative method he devised involved videotaping himself. He'd sit in front of the video-recorder talking about his feelings, then play back the tape with the volume off.

"I could actually see the pat-

tern of thinking."

He also gave himself goals. Hemmerick had long dreamed of studying in Concordia's interdisciplinary fine arts program.

It's a tough program to get into, Hemmerick said, but he reasoned he'd at least try.

He applied in early 1994 – and was accepted on that first try.

He graduated in 1997 – with distinction.

Meanwhile, 1993 also marked the start of his relationship with Harry Turnbull. The two, who live in Notre Dame de Grâce, recently celebrated their 12th anniversary.

Says Hemmerick: "I think the natural state of the soul is to enjoy life."

But for some, the challenges are enormous, and just knowing who you are is difficult, he adds.

"It's really a road of discovery."

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By the numbers

Number of people who die by suicide each year in Quebec: about 1,350.

Roughly 75 per cent are men. Women make significantly more suicide or "para-suicide" attempts.

Confirmed suicides, 2003: 1,268

The following figures are for 1999-2003:

Confirmed suicides: 6,980.

- 131 were aboriginals
- 325 were younger than 18
- 10 were in police custody
- 68 were inmates in provincial jails or federal prisons
- 65 jumped in front of a métro
- In 147 cases, the Quebec coroner's office determined the suicide was linked to a gambling addiction.
- In slightly more than 50 per cent of suicides, the method was hanging.

Quebec's suicide rates are among the highest in the industrialized world. In one study of 20 industrialized countries, Quebec had the third-highest male suicide rate after Finland and Austria.

Suicide is the No. 1 cause of death among 15-to-29-year-olds in Quebec.

Figures comparing Quebec's suicide rates to those of the rest of Canada can be misleading, because of different statistic-keeping methods...

For example, Ontario coroners are much more limited in when they can rule a death a suicide.

The following figures, covering 1997-99, contrast Quebec's suicide rates with those of British Columbia and Alberta, where statistic-keeping methods are similar to Quebec's.

Figures represent numbers per 100,000 population.

Men:

British Columbia: 17.7
Alberta: 23.4
Quebec: 30.7

Women:

British Columbia: 4.4
Alberta: 6.3
Quebec: 8.3

Source: Quebec coroner's office, Institut national de santé publique du Québec.

For aid and information

www.apqs.info (Association québécoise de prévention du suicide). Has links to sites in English.
Suicide-Action Montreal, (514) 723-4000, or toll-free 1-866-277-3553 (1-866-APPELLE)
Tel Aide, (514) 935-1101
Kids Help, call toll-free 1-800-668-6868

For names and phone numbers of crisis centres and other organizations offering services, call the Information and Referral Centre of Greater Montreal, (514) 527-1375, or visit www.info-reference.qc.ca