

Bruce Bartz
Senate Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee
Hearing on Veterans Suicide
March 16, 2023

Thank you for inviting me.

Just so everyone knows I come with a warning label that has 2 parts. The first is I curse a lot---- but I have made a promise to some of my co-workers not to do that today. The second is--- at some point during a conversation with me or listening to me talk, you will have a lump in your throat and/or tears in your eyes.

I am here to tell a story about an American hero. Trent Bartz. Not all will hear his story and think this he is a hero, but that's ok cause he is my hero. My son US Army reservist CPL Trent Bartz died by suicide on 19 August 2015 at the baby age of 20.

Trent was 6 years old and in 1 st grade on September 11, 2001. I believe it was then he knew he wanted to join the military. He made this colleague in his 2 nd grade art class.

There were other factors in Trent's life that influenced him to join the military. Trent was in awe of my father, a World War II veteran, who served in the Coast Guard and completed 4 different campaigns in the Pacific. He was also Fascinated by his great uncle Captain Jack Quinn, who was a Navy pilot that flew in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. All Trent talked about growing up was fling F14's and getting back at the terrorists that knocked down his—yes, his twin towers.

Trent's trauma started at an early age. Incidents of bullying toward the end of elementary school and through middle school were high on the list of behaviors that affected Trent's anxiety and depression. It seemed he was in tears daily. When Trent was in 8th grade, I had to keep him home from school because of his depression. His mother left him and his sister when he was in 3rd grade. She was absent from their lives for several years. He hated her relationship with prescription medication and alcohol. She was not a part of his life when he died.

Never the best, but always wanted to be the best. Trent always gave 100%. He loved to play football and baseball. He was always 2nd string because he was never very athletic and lacked self-confidence. He was the short pudgy kid.

When Trent was a junior in high school, he started going to the recruiter's office regularly. He met a recruiter by the name of James Taulbee who introduced him to CrossFit. From there it was game on. Trent was no longer the pudgy kid. The summer before his senior year, 27 June 2012 Trent became one of the 1% who signed that blank check for the country, he so much loved.

He became the starting center for his high school football team his senior year. Never missed a snap. At 6ft 165 pounds he was the smallest center in the league. But his heart was the biggest and that is what kept him in the fight. Trent seemed to be on cloud 9----on top of the world. I know I was, and I couldn't have been prouder.

I remember sitting in the recruiter's office helping Trent fill out his application. When we got to the 2 nd page— there where the 49 questions about physical health they all were easy for him to answer---except question 16. **Read from T's app**

We both knew he was previously on medication for depression. I knew he was in counseling, there was treatment for school adjustments. It really didn't seem to matter. I suggested to Trent that he answer no to that question just like the rest. I thought--- what could it hurt. It was back in middle school and grade school that he had all the issues with depression. At this point in his life, he was on top of the world---he showed no signs-- he was more accepted at school. From what I saw Trent was Ok. He was happy.

Yes, we lied, and I say we because I was just as responsible as he was for giving a false answer.

Trent graduated from HS and reported for boot camp at Ft Jackson in July of 2013. Yes, it was harder on me then it was him. I remember after boot camp him and I talking about what it was like. Him sharing stories about the final week and the battle buddies that he became so close to. He also shared several stories of how some of his battle buddies struggled. He opened to me for one of the very first times about his depression. I told him to suck it up.

After returning home Trent applied at the Valley Forge Military Academy and was accepted. It wasn't long after that when things started to spiral out of control. I ignored the signs. I remember the day he came to me and said Dad, I know this is going to disappoint you, but I don't want to go to Valley Forge. I want to go to Shippensburg. I have already withdrawn from the Forge and applied at Ship. He said he knew he needed structure, but he didn't have the confidence to do the work. He was afraid of failure---he was afraid of failing me. Looking back there was more involved. I truly believe it was other things, and one of them being alcohol and mental health issues that caused him to change his mind.

Trent failed his first semester at Shippensburg and was put on probation. He told me he was going to do better, but it never happened. In fact, his grades got worse. He failed— something that was not in his playbook.

There were a lot of warning signs and risk factors that I didn't see—that I didn't know about.

Mental health diagnosis or history to include depression and anxiety.

a relationship breakup 2 days prior to his death

Chronic pain—physical and mental

Social isolator—looking back Trent was a loner

Firearm ownership

Family history of suicide loss (my grandfather died by suicide)

Things got worse. Instead of taking responsibility and doing what he needed to do—Trent relied on the alcohol to make it better. Him and I were constantly having fights and arguments about his behavior. 19 August 2015 was a day I'll never forget.

It was the early afternoon Trent had just come home from looking for a full-time job. As soon as he walked through the door, I was on his case.

As Trent walked up the steps, he told me to F off (remember that promise I made to my coworkers about my language today). I went up the steps after him. We yelled and screamed, and it turned into a physical fight. If you remember what I said early on about CrossFit—and Trent no longer being the pudgy kid. Yeah, he could've kicked my butt he just didn't want to.

I hollered and screamed at Trent a few more few more times. I then made a statement that I regret—you need to get your crap together boy you were starting to act like the people that you despise.

I left the house and went to pick up Brayden after his first day of kindergarten. I came back in the house, and I immediately went upstairs because I wanted to finish arguing with Trent. As I walked up the steps, I felt the heat coming from my bedroom. I knew I had closed my door because I had my air conditioner running. Now I'm really pissed at Trent.

I hollered out what the hell are you doing in my bedroom? As soon as I got to the top of the steps, I realized what he was doing. He took my gun from dresser drawer went in the laundry room—put the gun to his head—and pull the trigger.

I immediately ran downstairs grab Brayden and all but throw him into the neighbor's house and ran back the steps

When I got back into the laundry room, I realized the Trent was still breathing and began CPR while on the phone to 911. I had no idea how long it took for help to arrive. I was able to determine that I missed Trent by 4 minutes. That was the difference from when he sent a text message saying he was going to go away for a bit and the time I called 911

I didn't realize it then, but I know now he had a look on his face that I've never seen before. That look —was the look of regret—members of our community—veterans—12-year-olds that die by suicide die because they are in a great deal of emotional and mental pain. I know they regret their actions because all of the suicide attempt survivors that I have talked with say the same thing—I wish I would have found a better solution.

Suicide, mental illness depression, anxiety are the only diseases that we blame the person for having. People die from suicide just like they do from any other disease, but we blame them

Do I think Trent's anxiety, depression and trauma are related to his military service? Do I think that had Trent been able to continue his counseling and his medication for those illnesses he would still be alive? I don't know. I can't answer those questions. All I can do is offer suggestions from what I've learned in the past seven years.

One of the best ways to bring awareness to our Mental Illness is hearing testimonials like this. The reason we do this is because we never want another parent, another sister, another nephew, to feel the way we do.

Not sure how to close other than a thank you. I would like to put something in about community-based programs. Something about funding that is needed.