

Loving response to beloved coach's life lost to suicide



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(Photo: Provided)

Funny, loud, goofy, magnetic. The guy people are drawn to, who draws energy into a room. The guy who's always "on," who is somehow larger than life.

The things people are saying about Robin Williams this week are some of the things people said of Nancy Miller's husband. Jim Miller was the dad who hauled out a stash of Rice Krispie Treats cereal and chocolate milk for his daughters after their mom left for work in the morning. He was the soccer coach who sprayed his hair blue to motivate his team, the buddy who loved a good prank, especially if he thought it up. He was the director of the Gallagher Student Center at Xavier University who, to students, seemed more like their dad.

Then one morning in July 2008, after exchanging routine phone calls with his wife about college

visits for their daughter and taking part in a long-term planning meeting at Xavier, he drove two hours to a hotel in Chillicothe and ended his life.

The shock of it, never far away, flooded back over Nancy Miller this week with [Robin Williams' suicide](#).

The word itself moves people away, like the friends who, upon seeing Nancy in the grocery store, suddenly realized what they were looking for was in a different aisle.

Nancy never attributed it to unkindness. She knew that, faced with something they can't fix and don't have answers for, humans sometimes resort to distance and silence.

But Nancy knew that would not be her family's way.

Jim Miller lived a full and rich life, a point that was not going to be lost to misplaced shame or stigma. "I told my daughters, 'Dad was an awesome guy and you need to believe that about all of his life,' " she says. "His death does not change that. It does not define him."

So in recognition of one of his traits – a paralyzing fear of heights – his wife and daughters took on skydiving, picturing him watching them from the ground – "a statue," Nancy says.

To celebrate his life-long love for running – he was a state-level high school runner and member of Mariemont High School's Hall of Fame – friends established the Warrior Race, which raises money for suicide prevention programs and is also a family fun day. This year's race, Oct. 11, includes the College Challenge in [memory of UC student Brogan Dulle](#), who died of suicide in May.

The memorial events, the reminders of Jim Miller's outgoing personality are not attempts to disguise the enormity of the loss, or to deny the shock or confusion over a death by suicide.

What they are is an opportunity – born of great tragedy – to talk about an end to life that, while difficult and unexpected, cannot be called rare.

But Nancy Miller believes that talking about it can make suicide rarer.

In the six years since her husband's death, she's learned there are behaviors and patterns to look for, even though she initially thought her husband had showed no signs. "For 28 years, never did he say one single word about being sad or depressed – never," she says of their years together. "Clearly it was something he thought was bad – 'I can't let down my guard, you'll think less of me.'"

But over the last month of his life, Jim had lost 20 pounds, was unable to sleep and disengaged from his closest friends. At work, colleagues found it surprising but not concerning when he sent them thank-you notes out of the blue, for being a friend or helping him do his job. At home, Nancy knew her husband mourned the loss of running after being sidelined by an injury.

It deprived him of the place he said had made him feel free.

Nancy Miller hopes talking about such things will teach people the behaviors to look for – withdrawal, feelings of purposelessness, sleep and eating changes, veiled messages about death, risky behaviors – and free them to acknowledge the pain they see. Medication often helps. Denial and blame don't. More mental health services are essential, especially for young people. And to families affected by suicide, sharing a kind word is preferable to waiting to find the perfect word.

"This happening to Robin Williams will allow there to be an open discussion – he was very open about his depression and abuse problems," she says. "People can take the opportunity to do something positive."

After Jim's death Nancy filled a book with notes from friends, Jim's colleagues and Xavier students recounting how Jim had shaped their lives. Now she works to make purpose of his death as well.

To take part

The Warrior Run, a 5K run and one-mile walk in memory of Jim Miller that raises funds for suicide prevention programs, takes place Oct. 11 in Mariemont. For information: www.cincywarriorrun.org.