

HOLIDAY SONG, COMPASSIONATE LISTENING HELP EASE PAIN

By MARY BROWNFIELD

CONSIDERING THE stress and depression brought on by job loss, home foreclosures and uncertainty about the economic future, a Pebble Beach songwriter hopes her tune will help spread a little cheer and remind people that loving one another is the most important aspect of Christmas.

"Mistletoe Kisses," created by Peggi Speers along with her sister, Libby Stanton, and friend Ricc Sandoval, can be found on her website, www.mistletoekisses.net. The video is free, and the song can be downloaded for 99 cents, 20 percent of which will go to the Salvation Army.

The site also offers "10 Amazing Ideas to Create the Most Incredible Christmas Ever!" which she said "show us that the most impor-

tant presents of all are the presence of each other, and 'Mistletoe Kisses' is about how Christmas brings us back to 'I love you.'"

According to Speers, whose compositions have been heard on "Sex and the City," "Desperate Housewives," "The Young & the Restless," and elsewhere, "The words are a reminder to all of us that the things we cherish the most are in our memories, 'the smell of pine, the taste of grandma's pumpkin pie' and those we hold dear." The site suggests less expensive gift options that have people spending time with each other rather than giving each other things.

A specific tragedy inspired Speers to spread word of her song and its hopeful message. On Nov. 28, a friend's ex-husband was reported missing, and days later Speers saw his car parked off the side of the road in

Skyline Forest. Police later found his body in the forest and discovered he left a suicide note in his apartment, according to Speers.

"So many Monterey County residents that I have spoken with have lost their money (some in the millions), homes, jobs, and/or businesses. It's a truly tough time for many," she observed. Speers hopes her song and website will encourage people "to hang in there and have hope this holiday season. It just might save someone's life."

On the rise

Carley Galarneau, community outreach coordinator for Suicide Prevention Service of the Central Coast, confirmed the down economy has sparked more calls to the non-profit's anonymous crisis line from people who are suicidal, who are traumatized and deeply depressed, or who have lost friends and loved ones to suicide.

"That's one of the most common reasons why people are calling us right now. People are losing their homes, people are losing their jobs, people are unsure what the future is going to bring," she said, and their safety nets are gone. That kind of setback is "often not the only thing," can push someone with other troubles over the edge.

Monthly call volume throughout the year generally runs between 200 and 500, and Galarneau said the hotline has recently been

fielding about 400 calls per month.

And in October — the most recent month for which SPS has statistics — nine people in Monterey County killed themselves.

"That was more than we've seen in one month in a while," she said.

Galarneau said thoughts of suicide are stigmatized, and American culture discourages outward expression of extreme psychological pain, so people feel isolated and afraid. That's why it's important the 68 volunteers who staff the crisis line can ensure callers of their anonymity and are trained in how to listen and respond.

"We provide an open and accepting environment," she said. Volunteers attentively listen to callers' worries, fears and other issues, and try to help them save their own lives.

"We help them make a plan to use their own strengths and coping skills and resources," she said. "It seems to be much more powerful and lasting for the person."

As with many other charities, Suicide Prevention Service of the Central Coast is strapped for resources and volunteers, according to Galarneau, but her most important message is that people know they can call the toll-free hotline — (877) ONE LIFE (663-5433) any time of day to discuss any worry or concern.

"It's important that people know they don't need to be suicidal to call," she said.



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