

Woman fought but lost battle with depression What appeared to be survival story ends in tragedy

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Four years ago, her story was one of a survivor who persevered and had hope for the future.

Today, it is a story of tragedy, of succumbing to the depression she battled for years.

In January 2001, Julie Harrison jumped from the upper levels of a parking structure in downtown Ann Arbor and lived. She was left partially paralyzed and hospitalized for two months, but a year later told a reporter she had turned her life around and wanted to live.

On Wednesday, Harrison made her way in her wheelchair to the top of a different parking structure, and she again jumped. This time she died.

She would have been 30 on Dec. 16.

Ann Arbor Detective Sgt. Richard Kinsey said this morning that it appears Harrison went off her anti-depression medication in July, and her family had been concerned about her.

“It’s so sad,” Kinsey said. “People around her said she was always pleasant and good to everyone.”

R. Patrick Harrison, Julie’s father, said the family would be making funeral arrangements today, but he declined to speak this morning about his daughter’s death.

Police said Harrison had just parted ways with her boyfriend before 4:25 p.m. Wednesday when she jumped. She said she was going to the People’s Food Co-operative on Fourth Avenue for groceries and would meet him a short time later.

She instead went to the sixth floor of the Ann and Ashley parking structure.

Harrison pulled herself out of her wheelchair and went over the edge. A motorist, who saw her fall and hit the sidewalk, called 911.

Harrison was still alive, but was pronounced dead at the University of Michigan Medical Center at 6:18 p.m., police said.

Nearly a year after her failed suicide attempt in 2001, Harrison shared her story with The News. The former runner who loved to dance spoke of first experiencing problems at Pioneer High School.

Harrison said at the time that a therapist and Prozac helped, and she later graduated from the University of Michigan and moved to Colorado to study massage therapy. But the problems persisted when she went off the medication to try acupuncture.

On Jan. 9, 2001, during a return trip home to Ann Arbor for the holidays, Harrison jumped from the fifth floor of the parking structure at Fourth and Main. She lived but had broken legs, ribs and vertebrae; and was bleeding from her kidney, liver and spleen. The fall left her with a near loss of feeling below her navel and a complete loss of feeling below her left knee.

Harrison told The News in 2002 that her outlook changed one day in the hospital, and when she was released, she began learning the reflexology method of massaging, taking violin lessons and oil painting. She said at the time that she wouldn't stop taking her medication and couldn't imagine not wanting to live.

Dr. William Thomson, an Ann Arbor psychologist who did not treat Harrison, said that depression often worsens during this time of year because of weather changes with less daylight and the holiday season. He said people should carefully consider whether to take medication, which is most effective in combination with therapy, and should not go off the medication without consulting with their doctor.

“There are several reasons that people go off medications. There are risks and side effects, these medications are expensive and usually take several weeks to reach the maximum effect,” Thomson said. “Once someone has decided to go on medication, it's dangerous to go off the medication without appropriate supervision of a physician.”

Among the common signs of depression are physical changes, such as changes in eating and sleeping habits, inability to find pleasure in activities the person used to enjoy, and discussion of suicide or heightened empathy toward someone who has taken their life, Thomson said.

“Depression is very common, and there are different forms,” Thomson said.

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