

August 9, 2010

Dear Crisis Center of Tampa Bay,

It must be wonderful to be a part of a mission and organization that can affect people over 1,000 miles away.

As a part of our typical Saturday morning routine, my husband, Brian, and I like to run through the city of Chicago and along its lake front. Before the city is awakened into its normal hustle and bustle, we enjoy running in and out of our city tree-lined side streets and over its many beautiful and historic bridges that crisscross the Chicago River until we make our way to Lake Michigan. No sirens. No buses. No cabs whizzing and honking, just the clean smell of summer, blooming flowers and the sun glistening into a thousand sparkly pieces as it raises over the calm morning waves of Lake Michigan. I'm writing you this letter to tell you of a Saturday morning run that my husband and I had a few weeks ago. **Although this particular Saturday morning began as many do, it ended up far differently than I ever expected and it will forever hold a place in my heart and soul.**

Just the day before, I returned back to Chicago from a business trip in Tampa where I had the opportunity to meet with employees from the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay and TransCare. Originally meeting with the VP, Terence Ramotar, regarding business matters specific to the ambulance service supporting the organization, **I was quickly intrigued with the mission of the organization and received a tour of the facility in order to gain an understanding of its full impact of care within the Tampa Bay community. I was floored.** It was heart-wrenching to see stories of victims and survivors posted to the walls of the center. I held back tears as I listened to more and more stories of those who have fallen victim to horrendous crimes, those who can no longer bear everyday circumstances, and those who the non-profit have been able to help. **What a truly amazing organization.** I was heavy hearted when leaving, but also was so thankful that I had been exposed to such a wonderful organization. **I was one more person who knew of this great work and was made aware of the desperate need and care of rape victims, abused women and children, those affected by the economy, the elderly, the mentally ill and people who have just plainly fallen on hard times.** I was affected.

Later that day, as I drove north on I-275 towards the airport, I noticed the various call boxes on the Sunshine Skyway Bridge. Because of my visit, I now knew that these phones, funded by the Crisis Center, helped to connect potential suicidal jumpers to those who could help them at the 24/7 call center. My entire plane ride home I kept wondering, "Do we have a 211 number to call in Chicago?" **"Do our emergency services connect victims of crime, poverty and illness to the services they need for recovery and support?"**

So, back to my routine Saturday morning run. Also, as a part of this routine, my husband (previous Air Force Captain), usually gets fed up with how my pace continually deteriorates from a run to a cadence jog. Before he jumps up and takes off at a faster pace to run home, I typically hear some ex-military jargon that is supposed to invigorate me to run harder and faster, but as a part of our normal routine I just mumble under my breath and return it with a smile and let him on his way.

Signaling the last quarter mile stretch of my run, I approached the Chicago Avenue bridge. But, this time I noticed something a little strange. **A middle-aged man with sliver gray hair and full beard was leaning over the side of the bridge.** At this point I slowed the jog to a walk and moved towards the man slowly, looking around at passing cars to determine if anyone else was seeing the same precarious situation.

Still moving closer I could see now that the man had one of his legs over the side of the bridge. He was half on the bridge and half off of it. In the next moment, I saw a black convertible coming from the opposite side of the bridge slowing its speed to observe.

The man and woman in the car yelled to me, "Does he need help?"

I yelled back, "I don't know! Please call 9-1-1!"

They promptly pulled over and started to dial their phones. I moved even closer to the man, introducing myself as Jean, and asked him his name.

No answer.

"Sir, I want to help you."

Silence.

“Are you thinking of jumping off of this bridge?”

Silence.

“Yes,” he finally replied.

I said, “Please don’t do this. Not today. I don’t know what has caused you to come to this place and time right now. But, I want to help. Please don’t do this.”

He simply replied, “You don’t know how I feel. I have felt this way for many years.”

I responded, “You’re right. But, there is always tomorrow. Maybe not tomorrow’s tomorrow, but perhaps the tomorrow after that will be better? Don’t you want to see? Let’s wait and see. Please talk to me.”

No answer.

By this time, traffic started to back up on the bridge with many on-lookers. **Each time someone asked if they could help, I yelled louder and louder, “YES! PLEASE CALL 9-1-1!”** In a moment that was probably no more than a minute, it now seemed like fifteen. I was thinking, “*Where are the cops?*” I turned to the man and said, “**I’m one person in Chicago who doesn’t want this for you. Let me help you.**” At this moment he started to climb more over the bridge and in the same split second that I grabbed his jacket trying to pull him back, a man ran up from behind me and grabbed onto his leg. I then said, “**See, there are now two.**” He loosened his grip a little and let us pull him in a bit. But, between the two of us, we were no match for his size. All of a sudden, in one’s and two’s more men and women ran up to us, grabbing more and more sections of clothing on the man. As each person came up I continued to tell him, “**See, there are four people now, five now...**” A woman trying to help chimed in, “**Sir, not today. Not today.**” By now, with all of the help from the other Chicagoans, I let go. They all worked together to pull the man completely off of the side of the bridge and forced him to sit down on the sidewalk. Just as this happened I heard sirens.

Two policemen ran up the opposite side of the street to the bridge. I waved frantically at them to cross over. Then two more came, then more sirens, a fire engine and an ambulance. At this point it was total chaos. The man was surrounded by more than 10 police officers who appropriately identified themselves and took over from the gathered crowd. The police officers forced him to his front-side; all the while he was combative. He shouted, “Let me go! Let me go! I want to do this! You cannot do this to me!”

The police officers hand-cuffed him and carried him away to the ambulance. **I stood there staring in disbelief at the man’s shattered sunglasses on the sidewalk. *What just happened?***

One of the fellow Chicagoans turned to me and said, “Thank you.” I didn’t know what to say. I quickly mustered up a return gesture. Then we all then turned to each other and over and over started to shake hands followed with a “Thank you.” After this was done, I stared in the direction of my house and ran towards it, continuing what I originally set out to do that morning. I cried all the way home.

While telling the story to my husband, again those same burning questions came back to me. “Do we have a 211 number to call?” I checked on the internet. No. “Do our emergency services connect victims of crime, poverty and illness to the services they need for recovery and support?” I checked on the internet. Sort of. **Help exists but it’s disparate and unclear to me whether or not the services are intertwined.** Over and over in my head I couldn’t help but think, “**This is a brilliant concept that the Crisis Center in Tampa started. Why isn’t this a nationwide effort?**”

I told Terence, from your organization, about my story because I wanted to let him know **it must be wonderful to be a part of a mission and organization that affects people over 1,000 miles away.** I truly believe that had I not visited your organization, I would not have been aware of my surroundings that morning. **How easy would it have been for this poor man to have gone unnoticed?** I’m sad, but also sure that **he was one of many people in a city of close to 3 million who go unnoticed every day.**

Looking back through the steps of that morning and that previous week, although they were routine, there were many decisions that led to my path crossing with the man on the bridge. I am thankful to your organization and for what you do to help the Tampa Bay community. As a Chicagoan, I wish we had something like this for our citizens. Regardless, you should know that your work and your mission travels well beyond the citizens of Tampa and Florida. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Jean McKiernan