

# One Second of Hope

## Transcript: U.S. Army Directorate of Prevention, Resilience and Readiness Outreach Webinar

*September 13, 2023*

**Presenter:**

Leslie Weirich

Lytaria Walker:

[00:00:08](#)

Welcome to the Directorate of Prevention, Resilience and Readiness Outreach webinar for September. At this time, all participants are in listen-only mode. However, you may ask questions at any time by placing them in the Q&A box. There will be several opportunities for questions throughout the webinar, and we should have some time at the end as well. Today's webinar has been approved for one hour of live continuing education units. Participants must obtain CEU certification through their local commanders by downloading the webinar presentation slides as attendance verification. The slides will also be posted in the chat box at the end of the webinar and emailed to registered participants as well. Please note that the views of DPRR Outreach Webinar presenters are their very own and are not endorsed by the Department of the Army or the Department of Defense. This month our guest is Ms. Leslie Weirich. Leslie Weirich is a suicide prevention specialist and advocate. She is an Elkhart County Indiana Suicide Prevention Coalition Board member and a Youth Mental Health First Aid Certified, QPR Certified Sources of Strength provisional trainer. During today's webinar, Ms. Weirich will share her story of loss and the unique circumstances that garnered her story national media attention. Good morning, Ms. Weirich, and thank you for joining us this morning. Ma'am, take it away.

Leslie Weirich:

[00:01:43](#)

Good morning. I want to thank the Army Directorate of Prevention, Resilience and Readiness for inviting me to share a bit of our story with you this morning. It's such an honor to be here. When I scheduled this presentation last summer, we started talking about the dates, and I didn't realize it would be just two days after 9/11 that I'd be speaking with you. I think that makes it even more meaningful for me to be here this week. A little background on me. I come from a very proud military family. In fact, the first man that I ever loved was a master gunnery sergeant in World War II, and I called him dad. Four of my five brothers have served in the military, two were in Vietnam and two stateside. So this work that I do is deeply personal to me, and it's an honor to be here with you today.

Leslie Weirich: [00:02:32](#) I love to start all of my talks with the Native American proverb that says, "Tell me the facts, and I'll learn. Tell me the truth, and I'll believe, but tell me a story, and it'll stay in my heart forever." Because if there's one thing that I've learned from speaking all over the nation over the past six-and-a-half years, it's that stories are what people remember and stories save lives. Before I get started with our story this morning, I want you to think about something. I want to ask you to think about your own life in a moment in your life when you heard the news about something, and it just stopped you in your tracks. You can remember exactly where you were in that moment, maybe who you were with, what you were doing. Maybe you were in a meeting at work, maybe driving your kids to school, maybe eating out at a restaurant, but wherever you were when you heard that news, you can remember it like it was just yesterday.

Leslie Weirich: [00:03:31](#) And I know for many of us that are listening here, that moment's probably 9/11 when those planes hit the twin towers and then attacked the Pentagon. I lived in Nashville at that time, and Alan Jackson wrote this beautiful song called "Where Were You when the World Stopped Turning That September Day?" I think for most of us, our lives were changed by that day, and it felt like our world stopped turning, and it's really never been the same since then. Well, for me, there was another September day that my world stopped turning, and it was September the 10th of 2016, which just so happens to be World Suicide Prevention and Awareness Day. It's definitely a day that's etched in my heart and in my mind in a way that I will never, ever forget because it was one of the hardest days for both me and my husband, and it definitely changed our lives forever.

Leslie Weirich: [00:04:27](#) But here I am seven years later, or as I like to say, seven Septembers later telling this story over and over and over, and I have a good friend who had come to hear me speak and give one of my keynotes, and she said, "This is it, Leslie, you took your greatest pain and turned it into passion, and now it's become your purpose." World Suicide Prevention and Awareness Day, for those of you who don't know, was this past Sunday. We are in World Suicide Prevention Awareness Week, and this is World Suicide Prevention Awareness Month. So it's not just a hashtag on my LinkedIn profile page. It's really become my life's purpose, and it's what gets me out of bed every single day because our story starts with this big strong football player. His name is Austin. Austin was what the world might call an overachiever, a high achiever.

Leslie Weirich: [00:05:28](#) He was the president of his freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior class at his high school. He ran track and played football all four years he was there. He was even voted the scholar athlete in one or both of those sports. He was nominated by his principal to be the Hugh O'Brien Leadership Award winner, which is only given to one student. You actually have to be nominated by the principal and you go on to attend a leadership conference. He went on to graduate above a perfect 4.0 by taking weighted honors during his senior year of high school, and he received over \$26,000 in renewable academic scholarships, which allowed him to go on and play football at Wabash College. Now, the college that Austin chose was one of the last three remaining all-male colleges in the United States. Wabash is known for developing young leaders, and that's why he was drawn to that college.

Leslie Weirich: [00:06:22](#) So when he arrived on campus, he was still looking for every opportunity he could find to be a leader and to step up to leadership. He was the president of something called the Independent Men's Association, which is a group of students who choose not to live in fraternities on this all-male campus. Austin was a very independent thinker, so he represented that student group of that student body very, very well. He was also a member of something called the War Council. Now, the WAR Council stands for Wabash Acts Responsibly, and this is a group of students who help the other students like incoming freshmen when they're overwhelmed with the stress of adjusting to college life or making good decisions about things like maybe drugs and alcohol on campus, just all kinds of mental health concerns. Also, he was actually scheduled to lead a meeting for the WAR Council on the morning of Monday, September 12th, 2016.

Leslie Weirich: [00:07:21](#) And the topic of that meeting that morning was mental health concerns on campus. But unfortunately, our son Austin never showed up for that meeting. He never showed up because in the early morning hours of Saturday, September the 10th, everything in his life and in ours was about to take a turn. And once again, coincidentally, that happened to be World Suicide Prevention and Awareness Day, and it's a day that changed our family forever, and it all began with the ringing of our doorbell at 2:30 in the morning. Now, that's a sound that no parent ever wants to hear, but especially at 2:30 in the morning. My husband, Keith, Austin's dad, can sleep through almost anything, but not me. I'm a very, very light sleeper. So as soon as I heard the pounding on my front door and the ringing of my doorbell, like my house was on fire, I jumped out of bed as quickly as I could. I woke my husband up and I said,

"Somebody's at our front door." Before he could even get out of bed, I was bolting down the stairs. We have two windows on the side of our front door, and I looked out the front and could see a police car parked in front of our house.

Leslie Weirich:

[00:08:32](#)

By that time, my husband was with me when we opened our front door and the two police officers standing on our porch said, "Do you have a son named Austin Weirich who attends Wabash College?" And I said, "Yes, we do." Then came the words that absolutely no parent ever wants to hear. You need to call this number because your son has been in an accident. I grabbed that card out of his hand as fast as I could, and I ran back into my house to find my cell phone. We called the dean of the college, and he had told us there had been an accident that evening. He said that Austin was with his girlfriend. There was an argument, and he had shot himself. He told us that they were life flighting him to St. Vincent's Hospital in Indianapolis, and we needed to get there as quickly as possible.

Leslie Weirich:

[00:09:19](#)

Now, I have seen some really bad thunderstorms in my lifetime, but I have never, ever driven through rain or lightning or thunder like we had to drive through that night. We had a three-hour drive ahead of us, and we were only about a half hour down the road when my cell phone rang. It was the emergency room doctor. He asked if we were on our way, and I told him that we were. Then he asked us if we could pull over to the side of the road so he could talk to us. He said he was sorry to tell us the ambulance had just arrived with our son and there was no pulse.

Leslie Weirich:

[00:09:56](#)

I said, "What do you mean?" It's like my head and my heart couldn't even process those words he was saying. He said, "Mr. and Mrs. Weirich, I'm sorry to tell you that your son did not survive the accident, but we still need you to come. Please be careful driving through the storm." In that moment, my husband, Keith, who was about the most soft-spoken man I've ever known in my life, just hit his fist on that steering wheel and cried out to God, "Why Austin? Why, why, why?" We sat on the side of that dark road for the next 10 minutes, and finally we drove on for the next two-and-a-half hours in silence and shock, except for the rain, which never let up. When we pulled into the parking lot at the hospital. My husband dropped me off at the front door so he could find a place to park, and I ran into the emergency room to tell him who I was. And in that moment, I saw this man walking toward me, and he had this white hospital jacket on. He said, Mrs. Weirich, my name is Paul and I'm the chaplain here. By that time, my husband was walking in with me

and the chaplain. Paul took us to the back to see if he could sit down with us and we could meet with the doctor.

Leslie Weirich: [00:11:23](#) If I live to be 99 years old, I'm never going to forget this man's face and especially his kind and gentle voice. He was only sitting down with us for a few minutes when the doctor and nurse both came in and asked us if we'd like to see our son. I'm not quite sure where these words came from, but immediately we said "No, because our son's not here anymore." That's a decision that my husband and I have never, ever regretted it. It was personal for our family. But here's the most amazing thing that happened that night. Because it was suicide, someone still had to identify Austin's body, and we knew we couldn't do it. So I started to describe a very unique football injury that my son had on his left ring finger. As I started to describe it, Chaplain Paul spoke up.

Leslie Weirich: [00:12:19](#) He said, "Mr. and Mrs. Weirich, I'll go back for you. I will identify your son's body for you." What an incredible gift that could have only been given to us by somebody that's walked in our shoes. Before Chaplain Paul went back, he knelt down to pray over us, and he asked God to comfort us in the same way he had been comforted just three years earlier when he had lost his 17-year-old son. We would spend the next several hours making decisions that no one and no parent should ever have to make in the middle of the night, in the middle of a hospital lounge, but Chaplain Paul never left our side. He helped us with funeral arrangements and even with organ donation, because somehow in the depths of my grief that night, I cried out that I wish we could have donated Austin's organs because he was so big and so strong and so healthy.

Leslie Weirich: [00:13:18](#) The doctor asked if he'd signed the back of his driver's license, and I told him that I knew he had, I'd been with him. I took him to get his license. So because he had a heartbeat on the way to the hospital, there was our first glimmer of hope that night. Within the next hour, we were able to donate both of our son's heart valves, his corneas, and all of his bone and tissue. Somehow or other that helped us feel like we weren't leaving everything there that night. We knew by morning that families would be getting phone calls, lives would be changed with that news, and eyesight would be restored.

Leslie Weirich: [00:13:59](#) This past Sunday just marked seven years since we sat on the side of that dark road, seven years since we heard our son's voice. And I'm not here just to tell you the sad part of my story, but I am here to tell you the rest of my story that morning. I met a very good friend through LinkedIn after Austin died, and she

had the back-to-back loss of her 39-year-old husband to cancer, and then two years later, her six-year-old son would die from a medical error in a hospital when he'd be given the wrong medication. She wrote a beautiful book called *The List*, and she sent me her book and she said, "Leslie, here's the deal. When we go through tragedy like you and I have, we really get two choices in life. Two choices. We can either stay stuck in our story or we can stand on our story." We knew within 24 hours of Austin's death that we were not going to be silent. We knew that if any part of our story could help another family not have to go through what we have, then we needed to tell it and we needed to share it. We just had no idea what a big platform we would be given to tell our story.

Leslie Weirich:

[00:15:15](#)

I'd like to tell you that that was the last tragedy that that small all-male college would ever have, but it wasn't. On the two-year anniversary of Austin's death, which would be World Suicide Prevention and Awareness Day. September 10th, 2018, my husband and I received a text message from one of Austin's former roommates. He said, "Mr. And Mrs. Weirich, I don't know if you heard, but Evan Hansen, the co-captain of the Wabash football team, took his life today. I'm sorry to have to tell you this, especially today, but I just didn't want you to hear about it on the news." So now our grief, which we were still learning how to navigate through, was shared it with the Hansen family of Carmel, Indiana. Evan Hansen was only 21 years old and about to graduate with a double major in Spanish and biology. He had just been recognized two days earlier on senior Saturday as a co-captain of the team. His parents stood proudly on both sides of him. They went out for dinner after the game. Evan even got up on Sunday morning and went to football practice, talked to all of his teammates, and even had a meeting with his coaches. And on Monday morning, Evan walked into the woods and in a split second, gave up hope and lost his life.

Leslie Weirich:

[00:16:47](#)

So both young men knew each other, both played on the same football team and both died on world suicide prevention Awareness Day. I couldn't make up our story even if I tried or would I ever want to. The following week after Evan's death, we were contacted by the largest newspaper in our state, which is the Indianapolis Star. They told us that they were going to be interviewing Evan's parents, and they wanted to know if we wanted to share our side of the story. They thought maybe if both families would share their stories, that we could help someone else who was reading the article not have to go through what we have. We agreed, and the following week, our article came out on a Wednesday, and by Saturday we had

made national news as a human-interest sports story. Now, Austin and Evan knew each other, but their backstories were very, very different because suicide is complicated.

Leslie Weirich: [00:17:47](#) It's never just about one thing. It's about a lot of little things like the perfect storm leading up to that single moment when life gets overwhelming and your stress is greater than your ability to cope with it, especially in young people. We're going to talk about that this morning and why that's so important. We're going to talk about the brain, because until the age of 25 years old, which both of our sons were 20 and 21, the brain is not fully developed and the most important part of the brain, our prefrontal cortex is not ready until we're 25 to 26.

Leslie Weirich: [00:18:29](#) So why is that so important? Let's look at Evan and Austin's stories. Yes, they knew each other. Yes, they attended the same small all-male college, played on the same team at the same time, and were both loved and respected by their friends. They both lost hope in a split second. Austin was only 20, Evan was 21, and they both could have made this world a better place. Let me tell you a little bit about Austin's last day. He actually FaceTimed me for 45 minutes. The day that he died, he was on top of the world. He told me all about his classes that semester. He was much more relaxed because he had chosen not to go on to play football that year, and he was going to apply to graduate school.

Leslie Weirich: [00:19:22](#) He lifted weights and worked out at 4:30 that afternoon, which is not exactly something you're going to do if you're planning on taking your life that evening. He called his dad about 6:30 that evening, and he was out mowing the yard, and he's so thankful he turned the lawnmower off and took that call. They talked all about Austin's weekend plans and all the football games coming up and what was going on with sports, and Austin was making plans for the weekend. He said he was going to go out to watch the Notre Dame game at his friend's house on Saturday. He even met with his football buddies and his roommates at 7:30 that evening for burgers.

Leslie Weirich: [00:20:02](#) But four hours later, after my son left the restaurant in a split second in an argument with a young woman, he would lose hope and he would lose his life. What's going on here with these young men, and especially what's going on with your young Soldiers right now? The Army is having their worst year ever for suicide. The rates are higher than they've ever been. Back in December of 2021, I was invited to speak at Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas because they'd had 20 Soldiers that year in 15 months lose their life to suicide. What was the common

denominator? Personal relationships. 19 of the 20 of those suicides were over personal relationships. That's why I do this. That's why I put myself through these details that I would much, much rather forget. So let's fast forward to 2023. I was invited to give a keynote talk at a suicide prevention summit this past May at Fort Cavazos in Killeen, Texas. My talk kicked off the summit. There were researchers from all over at that summit that day, including Dr. Craig Bryant, who wrote the amazing book, if you haven't read it, called Rethinking Suicide.

Leslie Weirich:

[00:21:27](#)

But here's what I've learned from my research, my observations over the past seven years and the work that I've done. It's all about the brain. The back of our brain is where our amygdala is. We know this as a kid. It's called our fight or flight to keep us safe when we're growing up. It's the first part of our brain that ever gets developed. It's also the part that houses those big emotions like anxiety, anger, and sadness. When a young Soldier's brain gets overwhelmed in a single moment like my son's did, like Evan's did, I actually call it an amygdala hijack because I believe the back of their brain overrides the front of their brain. It doesn't match up with reality. Things look much worse than they are in that moment, and they're just not ready to handle it. So in a split second, they lose hope. They lack impulse control, and they lose their lives.

Leslie Weirich:

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So once again, those feelings don't match their reasoning and their judgment. It's just not developed enough to know that no matter how bad a moment is, it's just a moment. My son took his life over a young woman that he knew less than six months. If he could come back here today, he would be the first person to tell you what an incredibly stupid thing he did and how he wished he could take it back. He would tell you that you never want your parents' doorbell ringing at 2:30 in the morning, and he would definitely tell you that you never want someone who loves you to be asked to identify your body, but he is not here. So I speak for him, and I speak on behalf of my son, Austin Robert Weirich, and I want to tell you that even the most suicidal teen, the most suicidal Soldier, the most suicidal college athlete, doesn't really want to take their life. That's not what that's about. It's about their brain getting overwhelmed in that moment, and they're trying to shut down the pain. So if we can really understand that about suicide, then we can go and interrupt that thinking we can save a lot of lives because that immature brain doesn't really want to die, but they can't figure out another way to shut down that pain. So they make a permanent decision about a very temporary problem. That's a little bit about Austin's background, but let me tell you a little bit more about Evan.

Leslie Weirich: [00:24:08](#) Evan stood on the football field, like I said, just two days earlier, being recognized as the co-captain of the team. He showed up for practice on Sunday. He talked to all of his teammates and his coaches. He even had a meeting with his coaches. According to his dad, he didn't let anyone know he was struggling on the outside, he was smiling and looking to the future. On the outside, Austin was lifting weights and going out for burgers, but both young men were fighting a silent battle with depression. Once again, suicide's complicated. It's never about that one thing, but a series of events that led up to that catalyst moment. Both of our sons had been in counseling over the summers before they died, but here's what I need you to hear this morning about your Soldiers. They're very, very similar to college athletes. Sometimes the toughness, the grit, the "man up Soldier" mentality that makes them stand up for that job, to show up, be an athlete, be a Soldier.

Leslie Weirich: [00:25:24](#) That same grit and determination also makes it really hard for them to ask for help when they need it. Many young people like Austin and Evan try to handle that struggle on their own. They think that admitting that they're struggling is going to be seen as a sign of weakness. It might impact their chances to play sports. But let's think about your Soldiers. They think admitting they're struggling might impact their ability for a promotion or maybe impact their clearance or the job they do. So they stuff it, and I call that at the invisible backpack with men. I have a whole entire talk I do on men's mental health about the invisible backpack. Evan had been playing tackle football since he was seven years old. His parents, Chuck and Mary were brave enough to donate his brain tissue, and the results confirmed that Evan had stage one CTE, chronic traumatic encephalopathy, as a brain disorder.

Leslie Weirich: [00:26:22](#) It's caused by repeated head injuries. It causes the death of the nerve cells in the brain, and CTE gets worse over time. Evan had been experiencing a lot of memory loss and a lot of depression. He was a biology major, so he knew he had it. He was very smart, and he knew that it would get worse over time, and something triggered his brain in that morning, that perfect storm, something overwhelmed him. The back of his brain took over the front of his brain, and he thought the only way out was to take his life. We have become very good friends with Chuck and Mary Hansen. We just walked with them this past Saturday on the campus of Wabash College where we do an annual 5K, and we raise funds for Austin's Scholarship Fund. They have established a wonderful legacy foundation, and they've raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for scholarships in memory of

Evan. They're raising a lot of awareness and funding for CTE and concussion research through their foundation.

Leslie Weirich:

[00:27:22](#)

While the Hansens understand that Evan's brain was impacted by early concussions, that's something that we'll never know about Austin. He had been playing tackle football since he was in middle school through high school and into college, but we did not know about CTE when he died. We did not know to even donate his brain tissue. But it's something that we've thought about over the years, and I tell you, the more and more work I do with Soldiers and with Soldier suicide, it's also something that I've thought about with your Soldiers. Taking that into consideration with the high rate of suicide in the military, I wonder if it's one of the many factors. How many of them enter the military after playing tackle football for 5, 6, 7, 8 years? Can concussions play a part in their mental health? Absolutely. They really, really affect how they respond to stress.

Leslie Weirich:

[00:28:12](#)

So that's one thing that I've learned also about speaking at Army bases more and more, is that a large percentage of Soldiers who come into the military have experienced some sort of childhood trauma. Many times it's in the form of physical violence or sexual abuse, and those things put them at a higher risk for a lot of things. They put them at a higher risk for being in an unhealthy relationship that involves domestic violence, because that's been role model for them, and that's all they know. It also increases their risk for suicide because they want to numb out with drugs and alcohol from the pain and trauma of their childhood. What we've learned from research and what's really come out recently is the correlation between romantic relationship problems and self-inflicted injuries. A recent study from an article that was written in military psychology in 2022, so just last year, it was entitled The Influence of Romantic Relationships in the Assessment of Suicide Risk in the US Army.

Leslie Weirich:

[00:29:23](#)

I don't even know if I need to say more than the title. Does it get any clearer than that when 19 of the 20 Soldiers at Fort Bliss ended their lives over a personal relationship? We need to figure out how we can back that up and disrupt that thinking and teach them coping skills. I believe it's really, really important for the Soldiers to hear my real-world story about Austin because they can see what a high achiever he was. They can see how driven and focused he was on success, like so many of them. But they can also see how he missed every warning sign. There were red flags in his relationship that he ignored. So I want to just briefly go over these because these are something that I cover with all the Soldiers when I speak on bases.

Leslie Weirich: [00:30:11](#) The first one is excessive jealousy. And like I tell everybody, it's okay to be a little jealous when you're in a personal relationship. When I talk to the Soldiers, but too much jealousy is a bad thing. When you can't spend time with people, you can't talk to other people, that's a red flag, which leads to the second one, which is controlling behavior. When one person has to make all the decisions in their relationship, what to do, what to wear, and who to spend time with. And many times this can turn into physical and emotional abuse, and there is no place for those resentments holding onto grudges, having the same argument or the same fight over and over and over. Dishonesty is just making up lies about things for no reason. You have to keep the peace, and you're making up lies about things, patterns of disrespect, not honoring your time, not honoring your job, what you do, and the things that are important to you are not important to them.

Leslie Weirich: [00:31:11](#) Lost relationships. And I will tell you this was a big red flag with our son Austin. Loved ones, family, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, all of us. But he knew that he was in an unhealthy relationship, and he knew we did not approve of the relationship, and we had talked to him about it. So he was pulling away from us. He was pulling away from family, and he was pulling away from some friends too. So that is definitely a red flag. And then number seven, hoping for a change. This also was one with our son. He was involved with a woman who did have some mental health challenges, and he was hoping he could be the one to change her. He could be the one to fix her, he could be the one to help her. And so once again, hoping for a change in a relationship and things are not changing.

Leslie Weirich: [00:31:56](#) That is red flag number seven. And then finally just walking around on eggshells. Just every little thing you do might cause an argument or set someone off. You can't live your life walking around on eggshells. So those are, I go into those much more in depth with Soldiers when I speak, but I wanted to go over those briefly with you. But the more important question to ask here is, why are our Soldiers getting into unhealthy relationships in the first place? Well, I think it has a lot to do with the same reason that my son did. They're homesick. They're away from home, they're lonely, they're without family support. So they're looking for something to fill that void. And many times they fall for the first person they find, and they ignore all those red flags because they're lonely.

Leslie Weirich: [00:32:44](#) One of the greatest things that has happened in the past several years when I speak on Army bases, is actually when I stop speaking, young Soldiers line up on the side of the stage to talk

to me. I mean, I can't even believe it, depending on what they have to do after I finish my talk, they'll wait 20, 30, 45 minutes just to speak to me because they just heard my story. And I go very in depth with the Soldiers about my story. It's very vulnerable. So because I've shared my story, they know that it's now safe to share theirs. They need to tell it. They need to tell it to somebody that they feel safe with. And I'll tell you what I actually believe. This is the most life-saving part of the time I spend on military bases. I remember one Soldier last spring, I had just finished one of my talks, and there were several Soldiers lined up to talk to me, and he kind of stayed in the back.

Leslie Weirich: [00:33:42](#) And I noticed he sort of made his way to the front. And as he came up to me, he broke down in tears. It was an emotional release for him that he was finally able to tell somebody a story in a safe place. He said he'd just broken up with his girlfriend about two hours before he came to my talk. He said he knew it was unhealthy and it was a toxic relationship, but he stayed in it because she was expecting a child. He said that he was getting deployed in a couple days, and he had made plans to take his life over the weekend before deployment. We talked for a while. I listened mostly, and then I took him to one of the military counselors. She started working with him that day, and she saw him the next day. I have checked in, and he's still here.

Leslie Weirich: [00:34:27](#) So here's the thing. I gave him an opportunity to tell me a story, which opened the door to get him help. It wasn't that hard. My talk gave him a new perspective on why he wants to stick around and be here tomorrow. I said, you do not have to be married to be a good father. You want to be a good, healthy father to be in this child's life. So that's what happens when I go on those bases. But once again, suicide's complicated. Everyone's story's different, but we do know the common denominator for so many of our Soldiers right now is personal relationships. I want to tell you that I got a phone call a few weeks ago from an Army leader. He asked if I'd be able to come up and talk to his Soldiers this fall. So I said, "Well, tell me what's going on."

Leslie Weirich: [00:35:15](#) I'm going to quote him exactly. This is what he said to me, "Leslie, it's like this. It's like my Soldiers are going to a vending machine and just selecting Dr. Pepper. They get in a fight; they break up; they take a firearm; they end their lives. It's just like they're choosing Dr. Pepper to end their lives. When a relationship fails, they just choose Dr. Pepper and end their lives." When I go to a military base, I don't sugarcoat it. I tell those Soldiers, I come from a proud military family. My father

was a master gunnery sergeant in World War II. I had two brothers in Vietnam. There is great honor in serving your country. There is great honor in laying down your life for your country, but there is no honor, zero honor, nothing heroic about taking your life over an argument or a breakup with a partner or a boyfriend or a girlfriend.

Leslie Weirich:

[00:36:12](#)

I tell them to pause. We look at coping skills. We talk about going out for a run, getting away from it, working out. We talk about those big emotions like anger, anxiety and sadness. And how not to let the back of your brain, your emotions, do your thinking when you're in that heightened sense of an argument with someone. Slow down. Use your brain so you can be here tomorrow, because I tell them, a better relationship is waiting for you. It's out there, but you're not going to know if you don't stick around to find out. Then I have to move on to a harder topic, which is gun safety. And I tell them, if you recognize even one of these red flags, just one, I don't need you to recognize two, just one. I need you to immediately leave my talk. I need you to go back to wherever your firearms are.

Leslie Weirich:

[00:37:08](#)

Give them to a battle buddy, and immediately lock them up. I gave that talk seven times to 4,400 Soldiers back in December of 21 at Fort Bliss. So the chaplain wanted me to speak right before Christmas because we know the holidays can be triggering for so many Soldiers, and they're getting deployed. They were getting deployed in February. He wanted my message to be front and center in their brains. And boy was it. So the second morning I was preparing to go do a talk. The chaplain came to pick me up. He was very Southern, and I'll never forget what he said to me. He said, "Well, Ms. Leslie, you made our chaplaincy office real busy yesterday afternoon." And I said, "Well, tell me more chaplain." He told me that there had been a young Soldier in one of my talks on the first day, my second talk, and he said that he was married. He had been a good Soldier and gone back to his barracks and had given his firearm to a battle buddy that locked it up. He came into the chaplaincy office later that afternoon, and he said, "I need help. We had such a horrible fight that if I would've had access to my firearms, I would've shot her and turned it on myself. I need help." So the chaplain said to me, "Well, there's two lives, Ms. Leslie, there's two lives. Let's go talk some more and see what you can do the rest of the week." So that's it right there. That's like that Army leader said. They just keep choosing Dr. Pepper like it's the only option, just picking up a firearm. When I speak to those Soldiers, we talk about other options. We talk about hope. We talk about what hope looks like in their lives because we have to reach those young impulsive brains, give them a

new way to handle things. We have to teach them that there's more than just Dr. Pepper. There's also Coke seven up, Pepsi Mountain do. There's lots of choices. And this is when we talk about hope, because hope is a strong weapon in the war on suicide. And I speak directly into their faces. And here's what I tell them: "I might not know where you come from. I might not know your whole story or what brought you into the military. I might not know what you're going through right now, but you took an oath not to leave a battle buddy behind. And no matter how hard your life is right now, or what you're going through, it's not going to last forever. And your battle buddies need you to be here tomorrow, and it only takes one second of hope to be here tomorrow."

Leslie Weirich:

[00:40:05](#)

Did you know that we can live 40 days without food and we can even live three days without water? We can live eight minutes without air, but only one second without hope. Because I believe the number one thing that has created the mental health crisis in our country, in our world, not just in the military, but everywhere, is a sense of hopelessness. Well, what's the big deal about hope, and why is that so important for our brain? Let me tell you, there is clinical research that shows us how much hope helps our brain because connection (and we're going to talk about connection here in a minute) creates hope, and hope saves lives. But first, let's look at the definition of hope. What is hope? Hope is thinking things are going to get better. Hope is expecting: I'm going to go out for burgers with my battle buddies tonight. I'm going to go watch a movie with my friends this weekend. You are meeting up with someone. You have something to look forward to. So here's the deal. How does hope work? When we have something to look forward to, we have connections with people. It releases those good hormones in our brains. I call them the love hormones, the feel-good hormones, the good endorphins, the oxytocin. Well, what happens when that gets released in your brain? Did you know a 32-second hug can release oxytocin, which can calm down anxiety, calm down, your cortisol, your stress hormone. What happens when anxiety gets calm? Our brains can think more clearly. Does that make sense? Hope helps our brain think more clearly. So we're not thinking out of the back of our brain in that heightened sense of fight or flight. So we don't think about those big emotions and let them take over.

Leslie Weirich:

[00:42:05](#)

We have something to look forward to. We know that this moment, as hard as it is, is not going to last forever. That's why we need to keep hope in our lives. Hope helps us think clearly. There's clinical research that backs it up. You can look it up. I've been saying this for years since Austin died, and this is why my

speaking program is called Leslie's Hope. Because if there's only one thing that you remember from my entire presentation today, here's your takeaway. Get your pen ready. No one is going to be shocked. No one ever dies of suicide. They don't. Their backstories might be different. What leads up to that moment might be different. Their entire childhood might be different, their careers, whatever it might be. Now, suicide is the manner of death, but the cause of death, loss of hope in that single moment when they couldn't see to the next moment that things were going to get better.

Leslie Weirich:

[00:43:07](#)

So let's think about your Soldiers. For some of them, life is heavy. They wonder if it's ever going to get better. They've lost hope. The days are long. They don't have things to look forward to. The work is harder than they ever thought it would be. Then you throw in that unhealthy relationship, which should add support to their life, but it adds more stress. I read a recent article in Army Military Magazine about a young woman named Rita York, and I love this article. She's a veteran now. She talks about her time when she was an active-duty Soldier. She said that a life of physical and emotional abuse by her ex-husband let her down a really destructive path of drinking, depression, and suicidal ideation when she was in the military. She goes on to say that she got married just six months after meeting him.

Leslie Weirich:

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She was in advanced individual training, and she felt lonely and afraid. During that time, she said, "I was just a young girl away from home. I didn't know anything about personal relationships." What helped Rita? What helped her? What pulled her out of that pit of depression and suicidal ideation? Connection. She found connection with other people. Connection put hope back in her life. Connection leads to hope. Hope saves lives. Whether we're civilians or Soldiers, we all need hope. We have to get hope in our lives in only one way: through people. Rita goes on to say she credits the church she started attending. The pastor and other people started reaching out. They started checking on her. They invited her to small groups. She said that she got connected with other people. She felt like she belonged to something. And that connection sparked hope.

Leslie Weirich:

[00:44:56](#)

So if you only have one takeaway from my talk, this is it. Connection is protection. If you follow me and I invite you to follow me on LinkedIn, I use this hashtag over and over and over. I've learned it in my suicide prevention work. Connection is protection. We need each other like we need air. Our world should have figured that out during the pandemic. Isolation doesn't work. It doesn't work for our brains. What's the

opposite of isolation? Connection. We are wired for connection. We were built that way. And it cannot come through a digital device or an electronic screen. It has to be a real live human interaction.

Leslie Weirich:

[00:45:39](#)

Now, let me throw one more thing here in the mix where we're going to talk our Gen Z, which is the average age of your Soldiers. They were born between 1997 and 2012. So they're Gen Zers. They were born with digital devices in their hands. Guess what we learned about that? A recent CDC study tells us that 63% of young adults between the ages of 18 to 25. So those are your young Soldiers. The CDC study tells us 63% of them are experiencing significant symptoms of depression. But it's interesting, and I'm going to speak predominantly to young men here because women's depression shows up differently. But in young men and in the Soldiers who are young men, depression doesn't have the same symptoms that you might think. It comes in the form many times of irritation, anger, irritability, and risky behavior.

Leslie Weirich:

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So we have to look at it differently in young men. Now, this is really critical. That same CDC study said that 65% of Gen Z, that's that age group, reports themselves as feeling lonely sometimes or always. That's 65%. So you say, "What's the big deal about loneliness, Leslie? We don't have to worry about in the Army; the Soldiers have each other. They're battle buddies." That has nothing to do with loneliness because loneliness is not about being alone. You can be in a room with a thousand Soldiers that you might call your battle buddies and you might still feel alone. Loneliness is about lack of connection and not feeling seen and not feeling heard. And that's what I think is going on with our Soldiers today. They are the most digitally connected loneliest generation ever. Have any of you read the recent report that came out in May from our surgeon general, Dr. Vivek Murthy labeled "Loneliness in America as an Epidemic"? He says that it takes a greater toll on our mental and physical health, and it's twice as harmful as obesity and smoking. I know that's hard to believe. That's shocking, isn't it? But here's what else he goes on to say, which I love. We have the power to take small steps every day. And I talk about this on my LinkedIn profile page, if you follow me. We can take small steps every day to strengthen relationships all around us, in our community, on our bases, wherever we are. It's up to us to rebuild social connections because connection leads to hope, and hope saves lives, and hope helps us think more clearly. So that's really what I love about that. I love how he says individual relationships—me and you, all of us here listening today—are

an untapped resource in turning around this mental health crisis in our country.

Leslie Weirich: [00:48:49](#) I want the Army to know they have a huge untapped resource within the military to turn this around. Because do you know how many young people, young Soldiers, young men, young women, do you know why many join the military? Because they want to belong. That's their primary motivation for joining. They want a sense of family, something they might not have had growing up. They arrive on base and it's a lot harder than they thought it was going to be. The hours are long, and the training is hard. And that's when their mental health takes a nosedive. Because they don't know who they can talk to. They don't know who they can trust. So they turn to coping in really unhealthy ways sometimes with drugs and alcohol. And most of all, with those unhealthy relationships they get into because they're lonely. What if we could change the scenario?

Leslie Weirich: [00:49:45](#) What if we were part of the solution? If we could put people in place that could be the safe person for them, someone they could talk to without fear of consequences, someone checking on them on a regular basis before they're struggling. In my line of work in suicide prevention, we call this the upstream approach, and it works. We want to move upstream. I usually say we want to move upstream before someone's ready to jump off the bridge. But in the case of the military, many times it's a firearm. We want to move upstream before they grab that firearm. Prevention's always going to be better than intervention.

Leslie Weirich: [00:50:23](#) I want to talk about the state of Alaska now and what they have done. It's on this slide, and I'm so honored to be invited to speak in December. I said, you have to be very dedicated to the work that you do to go to Alaska in December. So I will be on all of the bases in Anchorage and Fairbanks in December and learning more about this program. In 2021, they had lost 17 Soldiers. They said, "Enough is enough." It was a wakeup call for the Army's 11th Airborne Division at Fort Wainwright. They said, "We're moving upstream. We're going to figure this out and figure out how to turn these numbers around." So they created a program called Mission 100. And there are so many great points about this program. People serving in Alaska, you have to think about that.

Leslie Weirich: [00:51:13](#) They have typical stressors in that state that we're not going to face where we live: things like shorter winter days, geographic isolation. And many times they don't have a strong support system up there because they've been stationed from

somewhere else. There was an article or an interview done by an infantryman, Robert Woodell, and he talks about his mental health and how it was declining in Fairbanks. He spoke to PBS, and he said, "The situations that I'd encountered inside my unit had greatly impacted my mental health to a point that I would definitely say I was in a crisis situation, a suicidal situation." Well, the Army paid attention. They knew they could not lose anymore Soldiers up in Alaska. So they became innovative. They moved upstream, and I love it. The command chaplain, Colonel Masaki Nakazono, said, "We realized that connectedness is critical to the health and wellbeing of our Soldiers." That sounds like what the Surgeon General said about connection. That's when Mission 100 was created. What I love is the program says that all Soldiers, everybody from four-star generals to private first-class privates, has to have a wellness visit within their first six months. And then once a year they will go. But that's not all. What I love is they did something where they had team leaders on the base who would call a Soldier's family and introduce themselves. Because we know so many times a family member's going to know that the Soldier is in trouble and struggling before the Army might. But the family member doesn't understand the military system or even know how to contact someone in the unit or who their leader might be.

Leslie Weirich:

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So they made sure that they made that connection. They brought in more chaplains and counselors to Alaska, which has led to a shorter waiting time for counseling, a shorter waiting time for them to feel seen, to feel heard. And it led to a 95% reduction in Soldiers experiencing an immediate mental health crisis. That's huge. That difference. There you go. You can look at it. It made the difference of 17 suicides in 2021 to 6 suicides in 2022. So the chaplain went on to say that one of the key things they do is they walk around the Army barracks on the weekends and after work, because that's when those casual conversations can happen, and they can catch those problems before they bubble up and they get to a crisis point. And that's what happens when I speak to Soldiers when I'm on base. He went on to say, these meaningful conversations really allow Soldiers to process through their issues. Like I said before, they bubble up, before they get to the point where they feel so alone and so disconnected. I could not agree with the chaplain more. You don't even want to know how many Soldiers I have given my cell number to when I speak on bases. And I say, "You call me, you call me anytime."

Leslie Weirich:

[00:54:32](#)

Why? Because these Soldiers don't need another mental health app on their phone. They, they have enough of that. They've already reported themselves as being the loneliest generation.

They need a real live voice. They need a human connection. Mission 100 has provided this in the form of chaplains and counselors. The division in Alaska is also working on a lot of mental wellness efforts up there. They're buying them plane tickets to get home to see family when they can. They're providing them with blackout curtains for better sleep. There's a therapist up there in Alaska, and her name is Monique Andrews. She's actually in the Alaska Army National Guard, but she was interviewed and she's not associated with Mission 100, but I love what she says. She says she sees a lot of Soldiers in her practice. She describes the program as being brilliant. She said its approach reduces the stigma.

Leslie Weirich:

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That's attached right to mental health care. She said, "What's great about it is every person has to connect and talk. So it's not like us versus them. A general is going to go talk to a mental health provider, and a private is going to go talk to a mental health provider because they've realized that the military's had a long history of stigmatizing mental health care." But back in the day. But I think that's changing, and I think Mission 100 is helping that change happen quicker. So I look at those numbers again that we have on the screen here. It's making a difference. The total was six last year down from a high of 17. Something's working. Guess what that something is—it's human connection. Connection is protection. These Soldiers know they have an opportunity to talk to a chaplain. They have an opportunity to talk to a mental health counselor, someone who understands them. They know what they're going through. I want to congratulate the Army's 11th Airborne Division at Fort Wainwright for implementing Mission 100. It's my hope and my prayer that every military base around the world will follow their lead with similar programs to prevent suicide. Because I never ever want any Soldier's mom to have to hear her doorbell ring at 2:30 in the morning. Thank you so much for allowing me to share a bit of our story with you. It's been an honor to be here today.

Lytaria Walker:

[00:56:56](#)

Wow. Thank you very much Ms. Weirich, for this presentation this morning. Very powerful. It looks like we have a minute or two to take maybe one or two questions from the audience. If you would like to ask a question, please type your question in the Q&A box and we will read them aloud. There will be a short delay before the first question is announced. You may type your question in the Q&A box at this time. So far, I don't see any questions, but lots of high praise for you, Ms. Weirich. Awesome presentation. Thank you for sharing. I do see a question: "How does CTE research prevent suicide?"

Leslie Weirich: [00:57:59](#) So, CTE unfortunately cannot be diagnosed until after death. So you do have to donate the brain tissue. The question is how does CTE prevent suicide? What we know is that impact on the brain early on, and I'm an advocate of not letting young boys play tackle football. So it gives us greater information on protecting the brain and protecting the head from early head injury and early head trauma through sports.

Lytaria Walker: [00:58:33](#) Thank you for that. It looks like we have time for maybe one more question here. It says, "Our installation is mostly civilians, but we live in an area with a high suicide rate. Any ideas for us?"

Leslie Weirich: [00:58:45](#) That's a wonderful question. I think any type of group that you can get together with, and I think the one thing that Covid showed us was that isolation kills us. So there is a wonderful website called the Alliance of Hope at [allianceofhope.org](http://allianceofhope.org). They have all kinds of resources for getting connection groups and things going in your community to prevent suicide. So that would be my great resource to offer you this morning. And I'm sorry for our limited time.

Lytaria Walker: [00:59:32](#) Thank you for that. Unfortunately, we've run out of time for more questions. So we'll need to conclude this morning's webinar. I do want to just extend a most gracious thank you to Ms. Weirich for taking the time to do this presentation for us this morning. Thank you so very much, ma'am. Thank you, listeners, for joining today's webinar. Once the webinar concludes, you will be prompted to complete a survey. We appreciate your feedback as this helps us to improve upon future webinars. If you'd like to receive invitations for DPRR'S webinars and receive the latest news and information from the Directorate of Prevention, Resilience and Readiness, please go to DPRR's website [armyresilience.army.mil](http://armyresilience.army.mil) and sign up for notifications there. Thank you again for joining us this morning and have a wonderful rest of your day. Bye now.