

Tema tells first responders ? ?you are not alone?

By Mark Pavilons

While suicides of front line emergency personnel are making the headlines, the deep-rooted issue still hasn't fully surfaced. And emergency workers suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are still not coming forward asking for help. King's Vince Savoia, founder of the Tema Conter Memorial Trust, has made it his mission to get emergency personnel to open up about their experiences.

Together, Savoia and the Trust have made tremendous inroads in education and awareness of critical incident stress among emergency workers and the general public. And his message has spread far and wide ?literally from coast to coast.

Savoia is passionate about his cause and has devoted his full attention to the foundation after giving up a lucrative career in the financial industry. Operating under the radar out of King, Savoia deals with issues and organizations across Canada, spreading the word and building a network of support services.

Since the end of April, 23 first line personnel have committed suicide in Canada this year. And that's something that needs to be addressed.

Savoia admitted the public is talking more about the issue, but these numbers are concerning.

It's a challenge for him and his organization, too. Every time a suicide is reported to him, he struggles with how to deal with it.

The stigma among personnel is strong. They are still not talking about how they feel and what they've witnessed.

To respond, Tema just launched ?You are Not Alone,??a campaign of video messages and public service announcements that hope to increase awareness about suicide prevention.

There is no shame in asking for help and Tema is here to help. Call their Peer and Family Support Line at 1-888-288-8036.

Most organizations and employers do offer support services, crisis lines and peer support, but those suffering from PTSD simply refuse to use them, Savoia observed. Many would rather just live with it than ask for help.

Change has to occur both from the top down and bottom up, he stressed. Those who have come forward tend to be advocates and in turn, help others.

The Tema Conter Memorial Trust was created by Savoia, who in 1988 was the first paramedic to arrive on the scene of the murder. On Jan. 27, 1988 at the age of 25, Tema Conter was murdered by a convicted serial killer.

That one event changed his life forever.

Thirteen years later he set up this Memorial Trust in her name as a scholarship fund to help other paramedics and create awareness for Critical Incident Stress.

With Canadian actor (and Nobleton resident) Enrico Colantoni as national spokesperson, the organization is getting its name out, and garnering a renewed interest. Colantoni is best known for his role as Sergeant Greg Parker on the Toronto-based television series Flashpoint.

?When people recognize a face, it definitely helps,??Savoia said. With Colantoni delivering the simple yet powerful slogan ?

?Heroes Are Human? ? the Trust has been able to spread awareness across the country and beyond.

?When simply doing their jobs means sustaining a life-altering trauma themselves, we owe our emergency workers and military personnel the respect and the dignity of first-rate care, understanding and support,? Colantoni states on Tema's website.

Savoia said while it's estimated that eight per cent of the general public suffer from PTSD, the rate is double or triple that among first responders. It is not a surprising statistic, given the everyday trauma such workers face.

High on the Trust's efforts is a growing annual scholarship program which offers \$30,000 a year to students across the nation.

The Tema Conter Memorial Trust Scholarship Awards are presented to the emergency services or military students who best discuss, in an essay or journal, the psychological stressors of Acute, Cumulative and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and the effects that these stressors may have on their personal and professional lives.

Savoia completed a whirlwind summer tour across Canada that hit some 48 cities in 75 days, spreading the word

The message, passion and volunteer support is in place. The only thing missing is more funding. Savoia said they're lucky to have several committed corporate sponsors, but they've never received any government funding or charity grants.

There's a lot on Savoia's plate, but he's not slowing down. He is constantly speaking at conferences, schools, colleges, etc. He teaches crisis intervention in the 911 emergency services program at Seneca College.

They will host their 13th annual ?Heroes Tribute Gala? Feb. 28 at the Royalton Banquet and Conference Centre in Woodbridge.

Many special guests will be on hand, including Colantoni and Ken Shaw of CTV?News. Individual tickets and corporate tables are available.

For more visit, www.tema.ca or contact Savoia at 1-888-268-8036 or vsavoia@tema.ca.