



Almost 1 year since Huntsville teen's suicide, Daniel Adamek pushes for better mental health care

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HUNTSVILLE, Alabama – Daniel Adamek was a first-year graduate student more than 15 years ago when he learned he would be the father of a little boy named Christian.

The pregnancy came as a surprise to Adamek and then-wife, Angela, who were struggling to get by and unprepared to bring a new life into the world.

"But when he did arrive, there was never any question, he was supposed to be here," Adamek said. "He turned out to be extraordinary in many ways."

Approaching one year since Christian took his own life after months of deep depression, Adamek spoke publicly for the first time Saturday on the **origin of his new nonprofit organization Little Orange Fish**. In the wake of actor Robin Williams' high-profile suicide earlier this month, Adamek was candid about the weeks leading up to his 15-year-old son's death during the 2014 Pediatric Conference in Huntsville.

Adamek argued that Christian, a highly-intelligent, inquisitive and modest teenager, was much more than the Sept. 27 streaking incident that went viral just days before his passing last fall. The father of three dismissed rumors that Christian's decision to take his life resulted from threats that he might be labeled a registered sex offender or expelled from school.

"It made national news and there was a petition to have the principal of Sparkman High School removed," Adamek said. "There was a lot of anger towards him. It was insulting to me and to my son that they would make this simplistic suggestion that it was this one event that led to his suicide."

But suicides are never that simple. In Christian's case, a complex and often dark web of mental illness haunted him, eventually leading him to take his own life. That's what inspired Adamek to launch Little Orange Fish, named after a "little orange fish" Christian wrote about during a brief stay at a local crisis stabilization center last summer.

Drinking to ease the pain

Christian, whose parents split in late 2008, had "genius qualities" and loved to entertain his older sister, Danielle, who is now a student at the University of South Alabama in Mobile. The separation was devastating for the whole

family, but Christian and his siblings learned to cope with the loss and found a new normal in Huntsville, Adamek said.



Christian Adamek is pictured in an undated photo provided by his father. Adamek, 15, died Oct. 3, 2013, of injuries sustained the day before when he hanged himself. His father, Daniel Adamek, has launched a nonprofit organization to advocate for better mental health care. (Contributed by Daniel Adamek)

It wasn't until about a year and a half ago that Christian began to undergo physical, mental and behavioral changes. Adamek said his son grew 10 inches the previous year, and was beginning to "withdraw from everything."

Adamek first thought it was just typical teen behavior, but grew more alarmed as Christian began to further isolate himself, stop doing chores, cry uncontrollably and develop a personality that was not "as kind and gentle as he once was."

Christian was later found stumbling through his neighborhood after he broke into his dad's liquor cabinet and drank everything inside it.

Christian, whose uncle died from suicide early last year, agreed to see a counselor. About a month later, Adamek discovered Christian was brewing beer in his bedroom and drinking mouthwash, vanilla extract, "anything with alcohol in it."

"He was drinking that to ease the pain," Adamek said. "He told his cousin at the time that he didn't like the way it made him sick, but that felt better than what he was dealing with."

A few weeks before Christian's death, Adamek took his son to a local rehabilitation center, where he told health officials he was having suicidal thoughts. He was soon admitted to a North Alabama crisis center.

Because of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), Adamek agreed to let Christian have his privacy during treatment. When he picked his son up from the crisis center the following Monday, he was told Christian was a "nice kid ... who doesn't say much," nothing else.

"It just became too much"

He eventually got back into counseling and was prescribed an antidepressant by a family doctor. A week after taking the drug, Adamek said "he had his son back," but that didn't last long. The initial effects of the medication wore off within days.

The doctor doubled Christian's medication in late September. It was two days later that Christian was allowed to go to a Sparkman High football game, where he streaked across the field, was arrested and issued a probation officer.

Adamek picked up his son from the juvenile detention center, unaware that he had only a few days left with the teenager.

When Adamek tried to get his son help after the incident, Christian told doctors he wasn't suicidal and signed an agreement that he wouldn't harm himself or others. His father tried to find an inpatient mental health program that would be covered under their insurance, but he was unsuccessful.

On Oct. 2, just days after getting in trouble at school, Christian ate two big bowls of cereal, took his medication, napped on the couch and spoke on the phone with his probation officer. While his older sister was at church and his dad stepped out for a few minutes, Christian hanged himself in the garage. He died the next day from his injuries.

"When people say with Robin Williams that it's cowardice, that's pure ignorance," Adamek, who recently moved to Newnan, Ga., said. "I would've been in that same camp a year ago, saying, 'That's a really selfish act.' Christian, he struggled. ... At one point, it just became too much."

Little Orange Fish

Little Orange Fish's mission is "to bring greater visibility to available resources that support behavioral, emotional and mental health care needs, grow and strengthen the mental health care community and ensure immediate access to essential support and treatment."

Suicide is one of the leading causes of death in the U.S., **according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**. In 2011 (the most recent year for which data was available), more than 39,000 Americans killed themselves.

Hoping to get past the shame and stigma associated with suicide and mental illness, Adamek said he plans to continue telling Christian's story and educating others about Little Orange Fish. His daughter, Danielle, is also working to spread awareness of the organization in Mobile.

"When you watch horrific images of people jumping out of buildings on 9/11, people don't say, 'That person is really selfish for committing suicide,'" Adamek said. "They see there was no other option, and that's the way a depressed person feels. There's nothing that stops that burning and that aching, and I want people to tell their stories so we can understand the complexities and get past these barriers of denial and failure we all have."

Anyone wanting to support the Adamek family's efforts can donate to the Little Orange Fish Fund at any Redstone Federal Credit Union branch, or mail a check to Little Orange Fish, P.O. Box 22542, Huntsville, AL, 35814.

Feelings of suicide? Call 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

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