

A valuable community resource: the Center for Mental Health

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“There was no guilt, no shame, and that’s how mental health should be treated”

By Kendra Walker

“We live in paradise. How could anyone feel depressed here?”

It’s a difficult and extremely personal headspace to understand, recalls 33-year local Ian Hatchett, as so many of us were drawn to this town for its beauty, recreation, culture and community. But living here can also be trying, and isolating if you don’t know who or where to turn. Hatchett experienced this difficulty firsthand, but also found a safe haven with the Center for Mental Health (CMH).

After facing back-to-back heart surgeries in 2018, “I gradually went into a very deep, dark depression,” said Hatchett. “Sometimes life can just stack up against you. It was new terrain for me. I didn’t really understand what was happening to me.”

Even though he had no prior history of depression, Hatchett recalls his struggle. “I didn’t know how to ask for help. I didn’t know how to reach out and felt incredible guilt. I had given up. I had never given up

anything ever in my life. Suicide is really disproportionately prevalent in our community and I went very close.”

Fortunately, his friends recognized a need for help and took him to the Center for Mental Health in Gunnison. “We live in a village and my friends realized something was going on. I’m really lucky they were looking after me. They knew.”

Ian speaks highly of his experience with CMH, which now has a new location in Crested Butte. He says, “There’s an amazing level of compassion there and they help people who are in a really bad place. There was no guilt, no shame, and that’s how mental health should be treated.”

The Center for Mental Health provides behavioral health services through more than 10 facilities across the Western Slope and opened a Crested Butte location this summer in collaboration with Gunnison Valley Health.

Rural suicide rates are consistently higher than those in urban areas, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “We know we live in a rural community and we know there’s a stigma around mental health,” explained Kimberly Behounek, the Center for Mental Health’s regional director for Gunnison and Crested Butte. Unfortunately, Colorado has one of the highest suicide rates in the country and that rate is especially prevalent along the Western Slope, as reported by the Colorado Institute of Health.

This time of year can be particularly tough for people, explained CMH CEO Shelly Spaulding. “Part of the challenge is there are so many images through social media and TV in what the perfect holidays are supposed to look like,” she said. “And for so many people the perfect holiday is not their actual experience and that adds to any emotional turmoil they might be experiencing.” Financial stress at the end of the year, and shorter and darker winter days are also factors that can contribute, she said.

However, the new CMH Crested Butte location is a significant resource to providing the north end of the valley easier access to mental health care. CMH offers a number of mental health services, including peer support, substance use counseling, mental health therapy and medication management. According to Spaulding, the Crested Butte location has seen 223 new patients through November since opening this June.

CMH is currently working on increasing its staff and services to meet the needs of the community. “We are essentially looking to double our capacity for therapy starting in January,” said Behounek.

Behounek commends the professionalism and high skill level of the Crested Butte staff, which includes psychiatric nurse practitioner Laura Rogers, who worked previously at the Gunnison location. “There’s not another licensed nurse like her in the Crested Butte community,” said Behounek. “Having Laura in-person year-round has been tremendous for our community.”

Hatchett praises the team as well. “The people who work there are full of compassion and it’s a very welcoming place. I was connected with a brilliant therapist who was very smart and very funny. They made a really big effort to customize their therapeutic tools to fit me. There was a deep commitment from [my therapist] to get me up and keep going.”

Part-time Crested Butte resident and philanthropist Paul Uhl connected with the CMH after experiencing tragedy when his son Kyle died by suicide in October 2018. Uhl said being able to talk about it was not only therapeutic, but he was also motivated to help contribute to the opening of the Crested Butte

location and help those in need of affordable mental health care.

During Kyle's celebration of life, Uhl's family and friends raised close to \$12,000 for the CMH, specifically to help patients who can't afford mental health care. Through fundraising, the CMH strives to provide services free of charge if a patient does not have health insurance.

Uhl also spearheads CMH's Trek for Life, an annual fundraiser event in memory of Kyle to raise suicide awareness and prevention. The event follows one of Kyle's favorite hikes from Crested Butte over West Maroon Pass. This year's September event raised almost \$20,000 for CMH and individuals in the Crested Butte community who don't have insurance or cannot afford mental health care.

Uhl hopes to expand the 2020 Trek for Life into a two-day event, with one day for the hike and the second day being a community event in town. "We really want to reach out the Crested Butte community more effectively," said Uhl. "We want to be able to help those individuals in the community here who really need it and would benefit from this."

There were four suicides in Crested Butte in 2018, and the CMH hopes to avoid this tragedy affecting the community in the future. This year, the CMH also opened a Crisis Walk-In Center in Montrose, which provides urgent help 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. "In the last four months we've seen more than 100 people come over for services in the walk-in clinic," said Spaulding. "If you have a friend or a loved one who you're worried about, you can always reach out and talk to someone. I don't want people to feel like they're alone."

"A lot of people come here to go skiing or hiking or biking and enjoy the outdoors, but there's a chasm between the people who live and work here and those who come here to recreate," said Uhl. "I hope we can build awareness and help people get through the difficult times. We have a long way to go but I'm encouraged by what's been accomplished since the CMH has been open these past six months. The more we get people talking about it, I think we can help."

"There's a community resource right here for mental health," Hatchett emphasized. "If you've got a problem with your car, you take it to the mechanic. If you've got a toothache, you go to the dentist. It shouldn't be any different with mental health. I hope we as a community can keep our eyes open to friends showing signs of depression and withdrawal. This town really rallied around me. Because of them, I'm back and a contributing member of our beautiful community."

Take care of one another. If you, a friend or loved one is in need of help, contact the Center for Mental Health by phone (970) 252-6220, or text "talk" to 38255 to connect with a national crisis counselor. The Center for Mental Health in Crested Butte at 214 Sixth St., Suite 4 is open Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. (closed for lunch from 1 to 2 p.m.). The Montrose Crisis Walk-In Center provides urgent help 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. No insurance is needed. GVH's peer support specialist program has also been expanded to 24-hour, seven days a week service. See page 55 for more information.