

# Finding relief from her grief and a way to help others

## Waters' ice cream truck facilitates a conversation starting point

BY JEFF POOLE

Editor

**T**ammi Waters knows she'll never completely escape the pain. But she's figured out how to cope with it and she's determined to spare others what she's felt daily ever since her oldest son took his life on March 31, 2015.

Brandon Scott Wood is never far from his mother's mind. Her left arm, emblazoned with tattoos, is a living tombstone with his name,

dates of birth and death and the epitaph: "My story isn't over yet." They're proximate and permanent reminders of his life and her charge: to help even one person avoid the pain of losing a loved one to suicide.

With remarkable composure and a steady voice, Waters, now 50, recounts the day her first-born took his life.

Wood had moved back home and had been living with his mother and her husband, Russell, for about six months. He'd recently broken up

with his girlfriend, but was taking scuba-diving classes in an effort to become an underwater welder.

"There were signs," Waters remembers, "but I missed them. It was like he was lost."

Harried from her late-night/early-morning shift as a restaurant manager, Waters asked her son one evening if he wanted to watch a movie with her. He said, no, they'd watch it another time. She didn't think much

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CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

**Tammi Waters stands outside her B-Radd & Honey ice cream truck often seen at local events and activities.**

of it. She asked if he was OK, and he said, "I'm gonna be all right."

He didn't come home from work the next day.

Waters called his workplace and no one had seen him. It was unlike him not to show up for work, nor to call.

Waters knew something was horribly wrong. "It's like I could hear him calling me."

Instinctively, she drove to her mother's house in Louisa, even though her parents had yet to return from their trip to Florida. "I don't know why I did; I just knew that's where I had to go."

She found Brandon's car empty in her mother's barn. The keys were still in it. She knew he must be in the house.

"I ran up to the house and every door was closed. With each one I opened, I didn't know what I would find." Then came the bathroom door.

"There he was. On the floor. I thought he was asleep. I told him to wake up. He was dead."

Her level voice and steady gaze give way to a rush of tears and emotion, the pain, briefly suppressed, welling up uncontrollably.

"He was my best friend," she says between sobs. "I miss him so much every day."

With details from sheriff's deputies and the medical examiner, Waters learned her son killed himself by carbon monoxide poisoning.

A note he had pinned to the outside door that Waters didn't see until a deputy recovered it, advised: "Call 911. I'm upstairs. I chose to kill myself. Tell everyone I'm so sorry for being such a burden in their lives."

Parents should never have to bury their children. Her grief was overwhelming.

"That first year, I nearly took my own

life," Waters recalls. "But I thought, 'I can't do to my kids what this has done to me.' Mothers don't do that."

Still, she and her husband, Russell, both were in dark places, each seeking their own paths on the grieving spectrum with the final step, acceptance, seemingly unattainable.

"I had to ride by the funeral home every day on my way to work and just turn my head," Waters remembers. "I couldn't look."

Memories of her laying her head on her dead son's chest were still too raw and excruciating to bear.

One day, she visited his grave in the cemetery. "I thought, 'This is the day I either do something with myself or I end it all.'"

To others, her ultimate decision may have appeared curious, but to her it made perfect sense: it was time to start an ice cream truck.

"Brandon and I had talked about having an ice cream truck, something we could do together," she recalls. "I wouldn't do it because I didn't want to try it and have it fail."

At that point, though, she didn't care if it failed. The truck offered her a connection with her lost son and a purpose after his death.

One day, Waters and her husband were driving through the area, when he spied a faded, beat-up old JAUNT transit bus with a "for sale" sign in the window.

"He said, 'There's your ice cream truck,'" she laughs at the memory. "I mean, it looked rough. I thought, 'This isn't going to work.'"

Russell Waters went to work renovating and retrofitting the bus to accommodate popsicles, snow cones, coffee, drinks and candy. When it came time to paint the truck, he asked Waters what color she wanted it?

Pink with purple accents. She called her new venture B-Radd & Honey, acknowledging both her son (Brandon's nickname) and her husband.

On the back, beneath a photo of Brandon, are the words that define her

newfound mission: "Call before you act. Suicide hotline: 800-273-8255."

At first, Waters would just drive the truck through towns or neighborhoods. She'd think about Brandon, her pain and her purpose.

"When I'd stop, people would come up thinking it was just an ice cream truck, but when we'd start talking, people would just open up," she remembers. "Almost every person who came up to my truck had lost someone or knows someone who has lost someone to suicide."

"Everywhere I go, if I can help just one person, it's worth it," she continues.

Now in her third year driving the truck, she's a regular at community events and activities. The trademark pink truck is a Friday night fixture at Hornet home football games.

"People like the idea that I'm putting this out there and I'm facing this challenge and dealing with it," she says confidently. "Helping other people is the only way I could get through this. People ask me how can I keep on? How can I deal with this?"

The truck.

On average, 129 Americans die by suicide each day. It is the nation's 10th leading causes of death and the second leading cause of death among Americans ages 15 to 34. Wood was 29.

According to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, understanding the issues concerning suicide and mental health is an important way to take part in suicide prevention, help others in crisis and change the conversation around suicide.

On its website, the lifeline notes, "Suicide is not inevitable for anyone. By starting the conversation, providing support and directing help to those who need it, we can prevent suicides and save lives."

With the phone number of that hotline boldly printed on the back of her truck, Waters has adopted that mission.

"Some people just call me and ask for help," she says. "Others just want some-

one to talk to. Once they start talking to me, I try to connect them with help or resources."

She uses proceeds from sales to donate to schools, churches and others in the community to raise awareness for depression, bullying, addiction and suicide.

Waters regularly recalls the last few days of Wood's life and wonders what she could have done or should have done differently.

"I should have gotten him some help or some counseling," she says. "But I didn't know. I was a young mother. I just didn't know. I think he'd still be here if I did. He was such a good boy."

What she couldn't do for Wood, she tries to do for others.

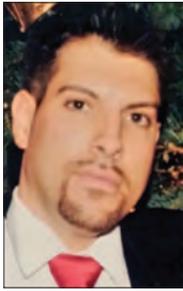
"This used to be something no one wanted to talk about, but people are more willing to talk about this now," she says. "I try to let people know there is hope. There are resources. Parents talk to me about their kids. Kids talk to me and tell me things they may not tell their parents."

"If I can save just one person, it's worth it," she says before the tears take over again. "I just couldn't save him. I want to spare other parents this pain."

Waters knows she'll never be entirely whole again without her first-born, but she takes comfort in her six other children, ranging in ages for 16 to 30. She says she values the time she has with them more than she ever has. Wood's death gave her a new perspective on what matters and what doesn't. Genuine conversations with people you care about are important. Trivial workplace problems are not.

"We're figuring it out," she says. "The truck is helping. Every day I get through is a day I'm closer to seeing him again."

She looks at her arm, tracing the words, "My story isn't over yet" followed by a semicolon. "It's a pause," she says, looking up and rubbing her arm instinctively—the semicolon, symbolic of a moment when the author could've ended the sentence but chose not to.



Wood