



## Calif. cop dedicated career to suicide prevention

**CHP Officer Kevin Briggs patrolled the Golden Gate Bridge for 23 years and encountered over 200 people 'over the rail'**

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SAN FRANCISCO — Kevin Briggs spent much of his career listening to strangers. He'd chat them up, get to know them. Then he'd hope they'd change their minds and not kill themselves.

Briggs, now retired, patrolled the southern end of the Golden Gate Bridge for the California Highway Patrol for 23 years. In that time, he came upon more than 200 people who were “over the rail” — a step from falling 220 feet to the water below. ***(Go to article link below for video presentation.)***

They were mostly men, and most were on the east, or city side of the bridge. All but two of the people Briggs met gave themselves a second chance.

It turned out Briggs was assigned to a location that has become an international destination of despair. The Bridge Rail Foundation, based in Sausalito, says nearly 1,600 people have died leaping off the Golden Gate, “more than any other location in the world.”

It isn't as if officials don't have ideas to address the problem, but they have been slow to implement them. A suicide barrier was approved by the Golden Gate Bridge Board of Directors in June 2014, but it isn't expected to be installed until 2018.

Meanwhile, September is National Suicide Prevention Month, when we will hear the grim numbers. In 2013, the most recent accounting by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 41,149 people committed suicide in the United States, far more than the 16,121 who were victims of homicide.

Briggs, who has written a book about his experiences called “Guardian of the Golden Gate,” doesn't have a scientific answer, but he does have experience.

[http://www.policeone.com/police-heroes/articles/8708049-Calif-cop-dedicated-career-to-suicide-prevention?utm\\_source=8708381&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=TopNewsRelated1Title&utm\\_campaign=P1Member&nid=87083](http://www.policeone.com/police-heroes/articles/8708049-Calif-cop-dedicated-career-to-suicide-prevention?utm_source=8708381&utm_medium=email&utm_content=TopNewsRelated1Title&utm_campaign=P1Member&nid=87083)

His takeaway? Reach out, talk to people. And listen.

“Most of them are not angry,” he said. “They feel they’ve let people down. They don’t want to die, but they feel they have to. They don’t want to hurt their family or friends, but they just don’t see a way out.”

### **Inches From Death**

Kevin Berthia knows the feeling. When a sports career and a marriage fell apart, he fell into a deep depression. He attempted suicide twice, and in March 2005, he found himself over the rail on the Golden Gate Bridge, his sneakers precariously perched on a small pipe over the abyss.

It was the last place in the world he expected to be.

“I had never been to the Golden Gate Bridge,” he said. “I never knew that it was known for suicides. I’m afraid of heights, I hate to be cold and hate to be the center of attention. And here I am freezing cold, 220 feet in the air, and I’m in the most uncomfortable position I’ve ever been in my life.”

As it happened, a Chronicle photographer, John Storey, was there. He captured a series of photos that still give viewers chills. Berthia isn’t even holding on. His hands are jammed in his black basketball shorts, and he’s balanced on the pipe with his chest leaning against the barrier.

“The only thing keeping me on that ledge is the wind,” Berthia recalls. “If it stopped, it’s over.”

In those situations Briggs, who attended the FBI’s well-known Crisis Intervention Unit, says he looked for “a hook,” a life detail that would resonate.

“He targeted the one thing that meant the most to me,” Berthia said. “My daughter’s first birthday was the next month and I would have missed it.”

### **Front-page News**

Berthia came back over the rail. But that was only the beginning. He was still depressed and conflicted. When he left the hospital he was embarrassed to find that a photo of his near-death experience had been on the front page of The Chronicle.

“Between going to the hospital and that photo, I said, ‘I am done with this,’” he said. “I never want to talk about this horrible day in my life. If anything, I was getting worse.”

By his count, that changed “2,988 days from the time I went to the bridge.” He was invited to the annual Lifesavers Dinner, hosted in New York City by the American Society for Suicide Prevention. Briggs was receiving an award for his work, and they asked Berthia to speak about their shared experience.

### **‘Story To Tell’**

“That night was the first time I talked about it,” he said. “I felt like there’s no point to having a life-changing experience if you don’t do anything about it. I started to share my life and accept who I was in that picture. I felt like I had a story to tell and I’d been given a platform to tell it.”

Today, he is a suicide prevention campaigner who frequently speaks to groups.

“I get to be an advocate,” he said. “I just feel like I am conquering fear every time I tell the story.”

### **Haunted By Losses**

For Briggs, Berthia’s story is a validation of what he learned leaning over that railing, although he’s the first to admit he’s haunted by the two men he couldn’t help.

“One guy actually turned and shook my hand, three times,” he says. “The third time he said, ‘Kevin, sorry I have to go,’ and jumped. It wears on you for the rest of your days. I think a little piece of me went down with him.”

Still, his core principle remains untouched — listening to someone in despair. He’d love to prevent suicide, but he’s hoping the takeaway is something simpler — take the time to talk to people. And listen.

“Maybe it’s a colleague at work,” he said. “Just kick back on a park bench for a few minutes and talk.”

His message is it doesn’t take much.

“You take a few minutes and you might save a life,” he said. “Imagine that.”

### **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**

(800) 273-8255

Hours: 24 hours, 7 days a week

Languages: English, Spanish

[www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

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