

# Former Lions QB Eric Hipple learns death is not the answer

By Eric Woodyard | ewoodyar@mlive.com

November 03, 2016 at 1:30 PM, updated November 03, 2016 at 1:33 PM



Former Detroit Lions quarterback Eric Hipple, left, and his daughter Tarah Hipple share a moment while talking about the loss of their 15-year-old son and brother, Jeff, to suicide, their personal experiences with depression and the importance of understanding mental health issues to a reporter on Tuesday, Nov. 1, 2016 at their home in Fenton. Hipple and his daughter have both written books and travel around the country discussing issues related to mental health and suicide prevention. The two participated in a new documentary film called *Death Is Not the Answer*, which will premiere in Royal Oak on Nov. 6 and will be featured on Detroit Public Television Nov. 11. Tegan Johnson | MLive.com

FENTON, MI -- Jeffrey Hipple handed his 7-year-old sister, Tarah, a glass of water and some hot popcorn.

"Do you need anything else?" he asked.

"No," she responded.

With their father and former Lions quarterback, Eric Hipple, out of town handling business and their mother, Shelly, busy running errands, Jeffrey was the man of the house on the cloudy, 50-degree day of April 9, 2000.

The 15-year-old Linden High School freshman was fulfilling babysitting obligations as Tarah enjoyed "The Parent Trap" movie in their Fenton home with her two best friends from across the street.

Before Jeffrey locked himself back into their parent's room to continue to watch basketball, he caught eye contact with Tarah for one last time.

"He was staring at me really weird. I remember staring at him, too," Tarah recalled. "There was just something very unspoken about it and I know that a lot of people say 'you were only 7' but you still know your siblings and you still know when something isn't right."

Moments later, the trio became startled by the sound of a loud pop that shook the house. "What was that?" one of Tarah's friends asked. "I don't know, I'll go ask Jeff," Tarah said, and began beating on the locked bedroom door.

Shelly would then enter the home from her parked Dodge minivan, not knowing what just went down. She used her key to burst through the room, the television in it blaring, to find her stepson spread across the frigid bathroom floor, victim of a single, self-inflicted gunshot wound.

She instantly called her husband to deliver the horrific news. "Jeff is dead," Shelly squealed.

"When I got the phone call I don't know how to describe it," said Eric Hipple. "Shock, numb, and I don't remember a whole lot at that point."

Hipple's only son had taken his own life as he tried to cope with depression. As survivors of the grief, agony and trauma, the Hipple family continues to use their experience to tackle the trauma of conquering suicide loss.

Sixteen years later, their story will be featured as one of the many subjects for a new documentary called "Death is Not the Answer." The two-hour film is directed and executive-produced by Keith Famie -- an 11-time Emmy Award winner. It will premier at the Emagine Royal Oak Theatre on Nov. 6 and on Detroit Public Television on Nov. 11. The mission is to explore the world of depression and suicide, which is often misunderstood in American society.

"It's not just about suicide, I mean that is a main component of it, but it's a very broad look at mental health in general and the whole wide range of it," Famie said. "When the film closes, they will walk away feeling touched, inspired and educated."

"Hopefully, they will be touched by the personal stories that were shared. But the goal is to empower the audience to leave knowing what they need to do to help."

### **You are not alone**

Jeff wasn't the only one in the family struggling with mental issues. Suicide is the 10<sup>th</sup> leading cause of death in America, according to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

Despite passing for more than 10,000 yards throughout his NFL career as a Detroit Lion from 1980-89, Hipple also battled his own demons. He never informed his son of his own suicide attempt nearly two years earlier in 1998, when he jumped out the passenger side of a moving vehicle heading toward the airport on the highway with his wife, Shelly, driving.

Before jumping, he scribbled "I'm sorry, I love you" on a note then placed it on her lap.

"I was driving down 275 near that Canton area. It's hard for me to kind of drive down there now and thank God I was in the slow lane going 70 (miles per hour)," Shelly said. "We had been arguing and he scribbled something on the note, put it on my lap and opened the door. I was in shock."

Luckily, Hipple didn't experience any life-changing injuries from the suicide attempt. He was able to fully recover from his injuries and lied to the media about the situation. The pressure of his dealing with life after football, remarrying, running his own business and overcoming substance abuse to numb the pain became unbearable to the retired signal caller.

After Jeff's death, he served 58 days in the Oakland County Jail for drunken driving.

Months of drinking and drug use had finally caught up with him. But after the arrest, Hipple slowly cleaned his life up and bounced back to become a spokesman for mental health.

The 59-year-old now works at the Eisenhower Center in Ann Arbor as an outreach specialist while participating in weekly speeches to endorse mental fitness. His personal journey of being tackled by life to calling new plays was chronicled in his 2009 autobiography titled "Real Men do cry." Staying afloat is a



daily chore.

"Suicide is usually the result of not having a solution," Hipple said. "So let's find the right solution because there is one out there and death is not it. Don't give up. Let's keep trying to find one. Surround yourself with the mindset that life can be worth living."

### **Learning forgiveness**

Tarah, 23, joins her father for monthly motivational speeches concerning the sensitive topic of self-destruction. She studies social work at Eastern Michigan University as she prepares for marriage. For so long, she admitted to feeling guilt then hatred at Jeffrey for taking his life.

"There was so much anger towards him. Honestly, it was all the way up until last year," Tarah said. "It was 15 years that it took me to get over it. It was just kind of 'How could you do that while I was home?'"

"You make up things in your head like, 'He didn't really care about me at all,' and then I started blaming him for taking away my childhood, making dad that way and stuff like that."

She experienced nightmares, which converted to a lack of self-love. From ages 15-17, she began to feel his same pain, while unknowingly dealing with depression, post-traumatic stress and anxiety. She started cutting herself.



"I was so angry at myself for being angry at Jeff that there were just so many emotions," she said. "Then I started thinking about who would find me, my mom or my dad, and then I broke down crying because I couldn't believe I got to almost the same point to where my brother was."

Extensive therapy and intense treatment helped save her life. Even after all they learned from Jeff's death, the Hipple family still didn't have faith in that sort of cognitive behavioral treatment.

It was then that Tarah began to forgive Jeff, as she understood his mental state. On the way to a presentation with her father last year, Tarah finally reached a change of heart and decided to write a six-page letter addressed to her big brother in order to let go of that animosity.

For Jeff to believe that life would be better without him is still painful to accept for Tarah, but in an improbable way his death has taught her to embrace life. She authored the 2014 book titled "Tarah's Song: Words of Survival" where she uses poetry to discharge the sadness.

Jeff is no longer here but the Hipple family uses that chilly, spring episode as a cautionary tale to help others be brave enough to thrive in life.

"I do it for him and to speak out to share my story so that other people will have the courage to share their story," Tarah said.

"Initially, I did it all for him and I did it for myself," Eric Hipple said. "Now, I do it for all the kids that would be like Jeff or the parents that would be like us, to try and keep them from going through this."