

Good Morning Everyone,

Although I was never involved with this church, I feel very much at home within this structure. I was baptized here, my family has roots within this building. I've celebrated in this building, I've cried buckets of tears in this building.

I learned here, learned about teamwork, the outdoors, watched my grandfather lead generations of boys through their scouting careers. This building represents community as much as it represents God for many who have crossed its threshold.

I'm honoured to have been asked to speak today, speak to people living in a community that in many ways shaped the person I have become.

I look out at people I've known my entire life, watching them watch me stand up here and talk publically about my life, openly and honestly. No matter how difficult life seems at times it's a moment like this that truly show me how blessed I am.

For those who don't know me, or my family, I'd like to begin by giving you a little background. My name is Rick Wituik, I am the oldest son of Bill and Trish Wituik. I'm 55 years old and I've been married for almost 29 years and have had three boys like my father before me.

I went through school in town, spent more than my fair share of time in the principal's office, and moved away in 1986.

I've never been unemployed. I'm a lifelong volunteer, and we own our home and for the past 20 plus years have been employed at 3M Canada.

I have many interests, and a few passions - my guitar, and my bicycle rank #1, and 2 in the passion category.



ride don't hide
Supporting Family Mental Health

Today I've been asked to speak to you about the adventure I had last year as I rode my bicycle over 2200 kms across the mountains and prairies of this beautiful country in support of the Canadian Mental Health Association's "Ride Don't Hide" national fundraiser.

My love of cycling comes directly from my grandfather, and my first bike trip outside the Ingersoll town limits was with him as we took on the overwhelming task of riding to Woodstock.

I have vivid memories of that day, one summer day over 40 years ago. Memories of feeling real excitement over the adventure, of riding past the quarries, slowly, at that time as the pits were close to the road and I'd only seen them from the side window of our station wagon at 50 miles an hour.

I still recall the smell of the lime in the air. Arriving in Woodstock, I had the feeling of being grown up, of having my little legs work to get me so very far away from my community. The experience left a mark on my life.

Many in this group will remember Mr. Carr, and know his story of adventure, crossing the globe by bicycle well before it was trendy. Mr. Carr would do slideshow presentations about his adventure and my grandfather took me to hear one of those presentations at the Masonic temple. I absolutely remember being struck by his story, by the images that he captured and shared with his audience, seeds planted in a young mind to be germinated decades later.

The bicycle has always represented freedom to me, I've always owned a bike and have always ridden.

As I became a father the love of cycling has been passed to the next generation and my oldest son took his first trip at 11 years old. Together we've travelled thousands of kms together. We've ridden the north shore of the Great Lakes all the way to Montreal, as far south as Jackson, Mississippi and up and down the Niagara Peninsula more times than I care to count.

The adventure I'll share today was different in many ways. I was doing this one solo, no support, just me and my gear. It was in true wilderness beyond anything I'd experienced solo. It was long, days turning into weeks without a place to call home, difficult logistics, limited accommodations, lack of food, and vast distances alone.

I'll share today the reasons behind the decision to step so far outside my comfort zone, to face anxiety and fear, the reasons I took on a challenge that was so much larger than anything we'd done to date, to challenge myself to do the unthinkable for many, and today I'll share our family's story of loss, of sadness and of hope.

Many in this room will already be aware of our story, as members of the church my parents and my in-laws are involved in the community that exists here. I know that they have been supported by so many within these walls and as one of the sons I want to thank those who've been so instrumental in helping my family deal with the reality of the loss they face every day.

For those present today that don't know our family I share our reason for becoming advocates.

In June 2014 our middle son Colin died by suicide in Toronto Ontario. He was 21 years old. 10 short months later one of his best friends since kindergarten, Brad, a kid we loved, died by suicide at his home in London. The impact these losses have had on our lives and the lives of those around us cannot not be measured.

We are unique - from the moment we found out about Colin's death we decided as a family to be open and honest about our loss. His obituary spoke directly to the cause of his death. We became advocates by default, taking every opportunity to confront stereotypes, to educate people about mental health and suicidal death, to try to reduce the stigma, and to stimulate positive conversation.

This is not a simple task.

How many of you say someone committed suicide? How many of you say someone committed cancer, committed heart disease, sounds ridiculous doesn't it, but mental health and physical health are the same thing. The last time I checked our brains are part of our bodies. People don't choose to be mentally ill, and people don't choose to struggle mentally, just like people don't choose to have cancer.

You commit a murder, you commit a robbery. The term commit suicide is something we all grew up with, like it was a rational act done by a rational thought process, a weakness to be hidden or brushed under the carpet.

Here are a few stats for you to digest: There are almost 6000 suicidal deaths in Canada every year - 6000! The actual number is even higher and some estimates say 50% higher as there are questions around some deaths that remove them from the shocking total.

Suicidal death is the second leading cause of death for people between the ages of 15-24.

20% of students attending high school within the Thames Valley District school Board do not feel like they belong in school.

I could rattle off stat after stat, each more eye opening than the next, each in itself shocking to some, but I think the three I've related demonstrate the scope of the problem we face as a global community. There is nothing new here as mental health issues are part of the human condition, have always been part of our existence, and honestly will always be part of the human narrative.

We all know someone impacted by mental health, and when at least 20% of Canadians will suffer a mental health issue, how can we help but be impacted. Just looking around this room, statistically 1 in 5 of us will be impacted directly. This is an alarming reality.

Just by our story alone I'd say that stat holds true, and yet as a society we continue to ignore this reality. We continue to hold our misconceptions about mental health in a way that prevents us from real understanding, continually reinforcing the stereotypes we were all taught as children - mental health issues happen to other people; and, mental health issues are choices. We're quick to offer opinions and solutions based on perceptions rather than based on education and this seems simply wrong to me.



After losing Colin, our family's focus has been on education, on challenging the misconceptions about mental health and suicidal death, on being open and honest about a difficult subject in the hope of changing long held beliefs about this invisible disease that do nothing but reinforce the shame and ignorance about this seemingly mysterious ailment.

We are also attempting to show people through our openness that it's okay to be vulnerable. It's okay to show people that we are hurting, broken, and in that vulnerable state we can not only survive the unimaginable, but impact change on one person at a time.

Supporting CMHA and their fundraiser is part of our story. As a team our family and friends have raised almost \$30,000 in support of mental health initiatives over the last two years, and I'm proud to say that Colin's "tour de friends" team was the country's number 1 fundraising team last year.

We are proud of the money raised by this amazing team, but it's not just the money. We are proud of the hundreds and hundreds of conversations resulting from the efforts of these loving people.

My ride last year was something I needed to do, not only in support of the cause but something I needed to do for me, to escape my life and take time away from everything comfortable, to face a huge challenge, to face fear in a very real way.

I had very simple goals for the trip. I wanted to actually complete the trip so I needed to be flexible as I faced the challenges, and I needed to meet and talk to as many people as possible, sharing our story and promoting the fundraiser.

I did not solicit funds on my Ride as my fundraising was completed well before I climbed on my bicycle. All I wanted to do was to meet people, to share and to listen, without the pressure of asking for donations.

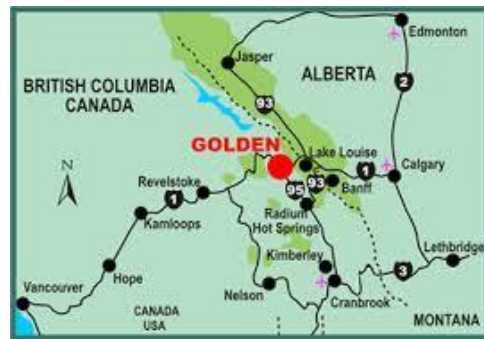
Over the course of the 31 riding days on the road I met close to 300 people. Everywhere I stopped I talked, and this simply would not have been possible without the bicycle.

The bike, loaded with everything I needed to survive the weeks on the road was the catalyst for almost every conversation I had as I slowly crossed this beautiful country. People are curious and seeing a person alone obviously on an adventure - it was easy to start conversations.

The entire experience was, and I always search for the correct word as I look back on my experience, ... eye opening. Of the 300 people who spoke to me I only had one person tell me that mental health issues had not touched this individual's life, one person.

I spoke everywhere I stopped - at gas stations, hotel lobbies, campgrounds, and at CMHA offices, always being honest and open. I spoke to people without homes who were on the streets, to retired people, to young people. My stage was wherever I happened to stop, and my audience was anyone willing to listen.

The Ride itself began in Golden BC, continued to Winnipeg where I hopped on a train to Toronto, then once in Toronto I followed the north shores of Lake Ontario and Lake Erie home to London, arriving on schedule almost 6 weeks after leaving. In the process I clocked over 2200 kms on my bicycle.



I learned so much as I faced the challenge I set for myself. The first thing I learned was that I'm not 20 years old anymore. It took months of planning to put this trip together. These months leading up to the departure were filled with a curious mixture of excitement and real anxiety. I was scared - scared of the what if's, of the distances between services, of being alone for weeks at a time.. all the planning and emotion that accompanied the preparation was at times overwhelming.

The spring weather last year was horrible and I found it difficult to climb onto my bike to get in shape for the journey. The end result was that I climbed into the airplane to start the trip with virtually no training under my belt. I think I'd ridden less than 40 kms in preparation for the journey (that's only riding to and from work twice from our home).

After the first day on the road my lack of training was apparent as I dragged myself into a hotel after the 120km ride from Golden to Radium Hot Springs in beautiful British Columbia. It took a full week to feel fit, and every day through the mountains was as much a physical challenge as it was a mental exercise.

Being alone in the mountains, on a bicycle is scary, and I challenge anyone who says it's not. It is wild country, wilderness that is something very foreign to a native of SW Ontario, and my second day on the road saw me face very real fear.

Crossing the Kootenay mountain range was not part of my original plan. A last minute decision to scrap the months of planning in order to experience riding along the Columbia River valley forced me to find another route across the mountains.

Leaving Radium Hot Springs there's only one road across the mountain range and that starts with an 11 km uphill ride across the Kootenay pass. The ride would have been difficult on a normal bike but on a loaded bike it was the most difficult climb I've ever done.

Steep inclines, total isolation, no services and mountains so vast, it was truly challenging, and add to that, a little tiny sign at the bottom of the pass that warned travellers not to stop for the next 11 kms because of bears on the road ! You have a recipe for a couple hours of high anxiety.

There was simply no way I could ride this pass with stopping. I'd ride for a km, stop, push my bike a few hundred meters then climb back on till I couldn't make another pedal stroke. About half way up cars coming down started to warn me of a Grizzly bear and her cubs at the summit. The more cars that stopped the higher my anxiety became and as I finally approached the summit my heart was pounding through my chest.



As I approached the bears I sang, yelled, and rang my bell to warn the bears and to comfort my overloaded brain. With one turn left to go I grabbed my bear spray and approached the turn carrying real fear.

I slowly turned the corner and I could see that the family had moved from the side of the road to a clearing maybe 100 meters from the road. I'm no bike racer but I guarantee my ride past those beautiful creatures was one of the quickest kms of the trip.

Several kms past the grizzly bears, I encountered two black bears eating berries along the road. This time I had the chance to grab my camera and I have an action shot of these magnificent creatures filling their bellies, oblivious to my presence as I flew by silently.

I took my time crossing the mountains, I'd stop to snack or brew a coffee whenever I could, prolonging my time in some of the most beautiful places our country has to offer. I wanted to soak it in, imprint the images in my memory, to be recalled whenever I needed a reminder of how blessed I was to be experiencing this adventure.

Each section of this beautiful country touched me deeply - the foothills; the view looking back to Calgary as the prairies and their challenges lay ahead; seeing a huge storm system over a prairie sky and actually riding into it, clouds moving faster than I've ever seen before, wind gusts pushing my loaded bike along at speeds I didn't reach going downhill in the mountains, and seeing the road change direction and committing my legs to hours of tough riding.

The trip was filled with experiences that have been stored for later use. Our country is beautiful, ever changing, and vast, but it's my interactions with people that have turned out to be the most impactful.

I remember the first stranger I spoke to, that first day. I was in a gas station convenience store, long line and the lady behind me was stressed, we started to talk.

Travelling alone across the mountains, head pounding, hours on the road ahead, she just unloaded her stress on me. I let her go in front of me, then asked the clerk to ring my stuff through at the same time and paid for her Tylenol and water.

She was surprised and grateful and as we moved outside together I told her our story, about our loss, the solo ride, the fundraiser and after sharing our experience she sat silently for what seemed like forever, she looked at me and said, "I need to call my friend. I feel like I was meant to stop here today, to meet you". I was tongue tied, something that rarely happens to me.

She went on to tell me about a friend who she'd recently been in contact with, a person from her past that she cared about, and was concerned about but had dismissed her feelings. Now she felt a need to reach out to this friend.

I remember walking back to my hotel room. Moments before that interaction I'd been full of anxiety about starting my ride home to London, real anxiety about the unknown. Yet now the anxiety had somehow softened, seeing that maybe sharing our story with strangers on the road, and if it would help, even one person, I relaxed I think, and felt inspired to complete this journey, somehow believing that I was doing the right thing, for me, in that moment.

I felt like maybe I was meant to meet that person, in that moment, 5 minutes frozen in time, captured as a memory to be relived over and over again, to refocus my energy when I felt I couldn't continue.

Other unforgettable moments - sharing a cold drink and amazing conversation with an outstanding group of indigenous people in Regina; sharing our experiences with mental health, sharing tears at our collective losses, people of this earth, no race, no tension, people grieving a loss in common; stopping to actually talk to people without homes struggling to survive, and seeing their faces change, soften as they relaxed during our conversations.



As I crossed the prairies heading toward Swift Current I saw what appeared to be a person off in the distance. It was windy, and I mean prairie windy, overcast and threatening rain. I had most of my warm clothing on, wind gear, gloves, and as I approached the stranger I saw that it was an indigenous woman, alone in the middle of nowhere. The first thing I noticed was she was not dressed for her surroundings. Jeans, tee shirt, a vest and backpack, that was it. When I stopped she asked if I knew how far Swift Current was, and when I told her it was 126 kms away she visibly changed, looked even more lost at the news.



I got off my bike and she shared a tiny part of her story with me, and my heart broke for her. Alone, isolated she looked scared and I remembered my fear in the mountains, and imagined the fear she'd faced her entire life. I gave her water, granola bars and \$20 which she refused many times before finally reaching out to take my help. Her eyes were cast down she reluctantly took my help. I rode away shaken, shaken by another interaction with a person in need, in need of the services I was promoting through this fundraiser.

Another day I met a lady on the train who lost her brother, sister-in-law and nephew to suicide. Her trembling hands betrayed her emotions as she shared her story.

It's impossible to relate my experience in a way that does it justice. Every day I spoke with people in need, people struggling to survive. I spoke at CMHA offices where I was able to feel hope again, listening to their stories, sharing our story, feeling like there are people who dedicate their lives to helping those that need the most help. I always left feeling inspired by their compassion.

The focus of our families efforts in advocacy have always been about awareness, education, and respect. I don't share a great deal, about Colin, about Brad, about the hugely talented, funny, loving sensitive people they were. This isn't just about our boys. This is about changing people's attitudes about mental health, about being open and honest, talking openly about mental health and suicidal death, about opening up on the difficult subjects in people's lives, removing the masks we all wear every day, and being vulnerable.

My bicycle trip was about facing my own fears, about slowing life down to meet people without celebrity or fanfare, about doing something I've enjoyed my entire life to help me heal, about helping CMHA help others.

Since returning home I've continued to speak about mental health, its impact, the need for education, and the unbelievable support of United Way. I don't have the answers, only an experience that has impacted my life and the lives of my family and people close to us, in a way that words are hard pressed to do justice to.



Today I'm asking all of you for only one thing - to open your minds about mental health, and in doing so to educate yourselves about this subject so that you can understand when mental health issues touch your lives.

I never expected to be a mental health advocate, and I really don't want this job, yet I find myself here today talking to all of you, proof positive that you never know where life will take you.

So to end my talk I'd like to thank each of you from the bottom of my forever broken heart, for supporting the people in my life that I love, for taking time out of your busy lives to listen to our story, and for hopefully taking my words here today with you as you confront the difficult challenges you face in your lives, with honesty and openness.

I wish you all good mental health,
Thank you.

Rick