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3, 2014

Deadline for letters to the editor is noon Monday. Letters should be limited to 400 words or less and will be edited for content and style. Submissions must meet publication standards. We reserve the right to refuse any letters. Opinions expressed by readers do not necessarily reflect those of the

Morgan County News.

## Letters To The Editor

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COLUMN

# Column ism 'isn't word

# Williams' suicide is siren for action



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Editor

Penitentiary in Petros. We have Frozen Head State Park, as well as the Catoosa Wildlife Management Area. There are parades, celebrations and festivals throughout the county all year. We also have people who love Morgan County and want to see it flourish.

In Scott and Campbell counties, officials are really promoting the idea of adventure tourism through ATV and motorcycle riding, hiking, climbing, camping, fishing and other outdoor activities. Campbell County sits on Norris Lake and is a summer home to thousands of people who flock to sunny Tennessee from the north and spend the hottest months of the year on a pontoon boat. Scott County is attracting big-name musicians to its annual White Knuckle event at the Brimstone Recreation Area. You won't see an airbrush stand or pecan log salesmen in either place. Nobody is trying to give you a henna tattoo. What you do see is license plates from Ohio, Pennsylvania, Florida, Kentucky, the Carolinas and other states around the country. Those are the folks who are visiting our geographical neighbors. We're insane if we don't try to lure them here too.

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The recent suicide of comedian and Oscar winning actor,

Robin Williams, sent a shock wave through the American entertainment landscape with a shattering reminder that deep may run the pain and suffering wrought by the mental illness of depression.

The American novelist and essayist, William Styron, wrote in his 1990 memoir his grave personal account of living with "despair beyond despair." "Depression is a disorder of mood," he wrote, "so mysteriously painful and elusive as to verge close to being beyond description."

For those afflicted with severe depression it truly is beyond description, and yet for those that live without the illness, the severity of depression that leads to suicide can seem, to many, beyond comprehension. Social media is alight with condolences, sympathy, and questions over Williams' followers and fans have wondered aloud, "How could this happen," "Why suicide," and "Did anyone know?"

So, what do we know about suicide? Did you know that 108 suicides occur daily across the nation, exceeding the national homicide rate, as reported by CBS Nightly News? Did you know that in Tennessee,

## Michael Yates Columnist

motor vehicle and suicide deaths were practically equal in 2012 (958 versus 956)? Did you know that a Tennessee Youth Risk Behavior Survey published in 2011 by Tennessee Department of Education cited one in seven students actually considered suicide; one in nine had developed a plan; and one in sixteen actually tried to take their life?

As the suicide statistics rise, so does the collateral toll on family and friends. Death by suicide, they readily acknowledge, changes everything, for everyone, evermore. It is a complicated grief and sorrow that never quite brings resolution or peace to the survivors.

The truth is as a society, we don't treat depression as a mental illness that deserves proper assessment, care, and treatment. Culturally, we drive it into the shadows and dress it in a shameful cloak of secrecy and embarrassment. Until we take a critical first step to stamp out the shame associated with suffering from a mental illness, the tragic losses and collateral grief from suicide will continue to mount – leaving us, once again, in bewildered disbelief. In a recent release

from the Commissioner of Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, Douglas Varney explored, "If you or someone you know and love is at a breaking point, especially one so low they speak of wanting to end their life, take immediate action to get them help." Here in the Anderson, Scott, Morgan, Campbell, and Roane County areas, immediate help comes from Ridgeview Behavioral Health Services who have caring professionals available to help at 865-482-1076, or through the Mobile Crisis Team, who is available 24 hours a day at 1-800-870-5481.

Hope and treatment are available. Stories of recovery and healing do exist. Together, let us deepen our understanding of the despair felt by many; let us commit ourselves to eliminating the stigma associated with mental illness; and let us be resolute in suicide prevention efforts. It is time to dignify our discussion of mental illness by stamping out the shame associated with it.

Michael Yates is Director of Development for Ridgeview not for profit community mental health center with locations in Anderson, Campbell, Morgan, Roane, and Scott counties.