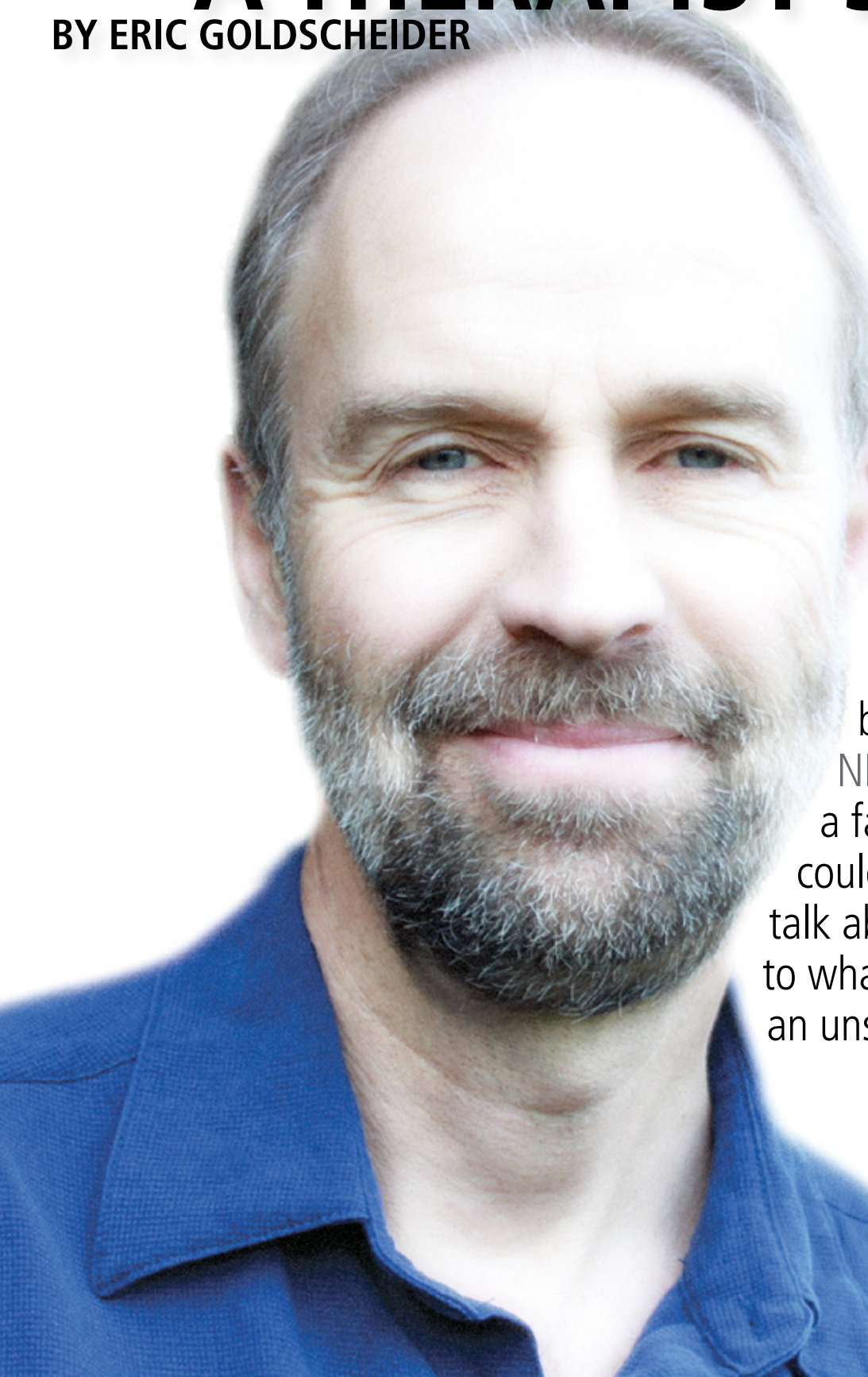


# A SOLDIER'S PAIN, A THERAPIST'S STORY

BY ERIC GOLDSCHIEDER



It was more than a year after his client, an Iraq war veteran, committed suicide before MARK NICKERSON '75, a family therapist, could bring himself to talk about his response to what to him was an unspeakable tragedy.

Jeffrey Lucey, a reservist in the United States Marines, was 23 years old when he hanged himself with a garden hose from a low beam in the basement of his family's home in Belchertown, Mass. The day before, as he had been once or twice a week during the previous month and a half, Lucey was in Mark Nickerson's office. The soldier was in a downward spiral exhibiting severe symptoms of what Nickerson identified as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He had returned the previous July from a tour of duty as a truck driver in the initial invasion of Iraq by U.S. troops massed in Kuwait. He began to fall apart on Christmas Eve and staggered from crisis to crisis, sometimes fueled by strong German beer and blackberry brandy. He wrecked a car, he made a spectacle of himself at what was to have been his graduation from community college, and he fought off people trying to help him.

Lucey's mother contacted Nickerson in April 2004. Their therapy sessions began in May, and on June 22 Lucey was dead, just a few weeks before he was supposed to redeploy.

The topic of suicide came up several times, but Lucey assured his therapist that he wouldn't allow his feelings of hopelessness to drive him to do something that drastic. "He always reassured me that he wouldn't kill himself because he didn't want to hurt his family," Nickerson recalled during a recent interview. "That was a credible motivator because he had a strong relationship with his family."

Nickerson knew Lucey from before the war, having counseled him when he got into some minor trouble during high school. "He had a *joie de vivre*, a sense of invincibility," remembers Nickerson. This time around, Nickerson could still see traces of Jeff's humor and "mild cockiness," he said, "but it seemed like there was a hole blown out of the center of him.... it was very striking how much this young man had changed."

The family succeeded in getting Lucey into the Veterans Administration hospital in the Leeds section of Northampton, not far from their home, over the Memorial Day weekend, but Jeff checked himself out after 72 hours and wouldn't go back. Nickerson helped identify a residential treatment program for PTSD in Vermont with an open bed and was arranging the placement with a veterans advocate on the day Lucey died.

Nickerson felt his own world change when he got the call just a few hours after Kevin Lucey found his son's body. "I was in shock," he said. As a trauma specialist with a special interest in men's mental health, Nickerson regularly sees patients with histories of violence and desperation. "I have been doing this long enough that I've learned to leave the content of a session in the session. I don't carry a lot away with me," he said, "I have trained myself in my life not to dwell on what might have been."

This time he was sobered by something profoundly gripping. Nickerson made a point of being available to the family after the suicide. But he tried to put Jeff's death to the side as much as possible. "I acknowledged it, but I didn't actually really want to," he said, "I was so concerned it would seep into the rest of my life, into the rest of my work, and that it would make me afraid to work with deeply troubled people."

It was several months before Nickerson even shared the fact of his patient's suicide with a peer consultation group "Partly, I think I was afraid that people would attribute it as a failure on my part."

After some time passed, Nickerson started speaking at public forums with Joyce and Kevin Lucey, Jeff's parents, on PTSD and the mental health needs of veterans. He testified as part of a successful lawsuit the Luceys brought against the Department of Veterans Affairs for not having appropriate systems in place to respond to their son's crisis. He also supported the Luceys in their decision to talk openly about their horror.

More recently, Nickerson realized that he had his own story to tell, especially since he knew Jeff both before and after his military service. The Luceys gave him their blessing to breach the traditional obligation a therapist has to keep the contents of client sessions in strict confidence, and to embark on a book he is tentatively calling *Camel Spiders*. The title is a reference to arachnids common in Iraq. Their size, speed, and ferocity are the subject of much lore among veterans. "As it turns out," said Nickerson, "Jeffrey was afraid of spiders as a kid. And they were among his hallucinations as part of his PTSD and drinking-related problems. He woke up at night, sometimes thinking there were spiders in his room. To me that's a metaphor for all that was really bothering him. Even to big tough military people with guns, apparently this slips in and finds a vulnerability."

Nickerson remembers one of the first conversations he had with Joyce Lucey after Jeff's death. "I remember saying, 'you can keep this tragedy really private, bear the weight of this alone and perhaps struggle with self-blame for not having done enough. Or, you could see it in a larger context of society and war and let others share the burden.' They chose the latter and went on to share what they'd been through."

Over the last seven years Joyce and Kevin Lucey have appeared on television talk shows, spoken at anti-war rallies, and made themselves available to reporters and documentary filmmakers from around the world. Nickerson introduced them to the Veterans Education Project, which sends speakers throughout Western New England to talk about firsthand experiences of war. They also worked along with Nickerson on