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Adam's Fall

The Macdonald Bridge is a suicide hot spot, counting Adam Cashen among its victims. But as this award-winning story shows, "means reduction"—a suicide barrier—would make the bridge safer.

by Matthieu Aikins

Editor's note *This story was honoured with two journalism awards in 2009: The Canadian Association of Journalists gave a CAJ award for best investigative piece by a community newspaper, and it won a gold Atlantic Journalism Award for enterprise reporting. More importantly, the Halifax-Dartmouth Bridge Commission has decided to install suicide barriers along the entire length of the Macdonald Bridge.*



Last summer, around 6am on July 26, 19-year-old Adam Cashen walked onto the pedestrian lane of the Macdonald Bridge. He had just been released from the Brunswick Street police station, where he had been taken when he refused a breathalyser test after being pulled over several hours earlier.

Adam walked a few hundred metres along the walkway until he was above the water; he then text-messaged his mother. Placing his phone against the pavement, he went up to the railing and, leaning against it, faced the first rays of sunlight coming up over the Dartmouth shore, on what would turn out to be one of the hottest days of the summer.

About half an hour later---during which time bridge security was warned that Adam was a suicide risk---Bernadette Beaton, a physiotherapist at the Queen Elizabeth II Hospital, was walking across the bridge on her way to work and saw Adam leaning against the railing. "He was a nice-looking boy," she recalls. "He had mousy-coloured hair and it was kind of spiky. He looked very well dressed."

As she passed him, she noticed a cellphone on the ground. Turning back, she saw that Adam had climbed the chest-high railing that separates the pedestrian lane from the 54-metre drop to the harbour below. He was sitting on its top edge, his back to the rising sun, watching her.

Shocked, Beaton asked if he was OK. "Do you want me to call somebody for you?" she said. When Adam replied that he was fine, Beaton told him that he was scaring her and asked him to get down. Adam said nothing and waited patiently for her to leave. "It was almost like he was being polite. There was kind of a peaceful look on his face," she says.

Frightened that she might provoke him to jump, Beaton turned away, and surreptitiously dialed 911 on her cell. As she did so, she stooped to pick up the boy's phone. The screen on it said: "Missed call. Dad." When she turned back to look, he was gone.

Numberless & nameless

For most Haligonians the Macdonald Bridge is a symbol of the city itself, an icon on par with the Citadel; for a few, it is a symbol of death.

They are the survivors of those who jump.

"I miss my brother daily," says Mark Maas. Like Adam Cashen, Mark's brother Allan Stephen Maas ended his life on the bridge, leaping on October 6, 2005, in front of police, commuters and a Global Television camera crew.

Each time he sees the bridge, Mark is reminded of his brother. "Unfortunately for me I need to drive over to Halifax on a frequent basis," says Mark, who lives in Dartmouth. "Initially, it was very difficult."

Allan's story illustrates the lure that the bridge can exert on the suicidal. A few days before his brother's death, Mark visited Allan at his Brunswick Street apartment. Allan, who had been suffering from mental illness for years, was despondent and spoke of walking the bridge repeatedly, "thinking about it." On the morning of October 6---Allan's 32nd birthday---police prevented him from

jumping from the bridge. He was arrested, taken to the hospital and released that afternoon. He went straight back to the bridge.

"The number of people who jump from that bridge is staggering," Mark says.

Most people who've been commuting on foot across the bridge long enough can tell you a jumper story---Bernadette Beaton says that Adam is the second jumper she's encountered. Jumpers come to the bridge seeking a spectacular final view and a quick, sure death, and the jump is about as lethal as it gets: in the 54 metres between the deck and the harbour, a body accelerates to nearly 120 km/h. There have been rare survivors, but generally jumpers die from blunt-force trauma on impact, as both Adam and Allan did.

Not everyone hits the water. People have landed in the dockyard parking lot and on the rock piles supporting the towers. One jumper, leaping from the Dartmouth end, ended up in a woman's backyard.

It's difficult to ascertain precisely how many people have jumped from the bridge in the 53 years since it opened. The Halifax-Dartmouth Bridge Commission refuses to release statistics on the grounds that it might encourage more jumpers. "We'd just as well not talk about suicide at all," says Steve Snider, the commission's CEO. The commission denied a request for statistics filed by The Coast under the Freedom of Information Act on the same grounds.

According to figures provided by the Halifax Regional Police Department, over the past three years, officers have received seven calls for service relating to suicide on the bridge and 32 relating to suicide attempts. This is surely an underestimate of the actual number of jumpers. Dr. Matt Bowes, who, as the province's chief medical examiner, oversees all autopsies in instances of sudden death, tells me that his office sees at least half a dozen bridge suicides per year (which would be six percent of Nova Scotia's annual total of about 100 suicides). Of course, those who jump unseen---especially at night---may never be found.

Dyrick McDermott, who worked for eight years as a bridge painter during the summer, says that some summer seasons bridge workers would hear of as many as eight jumpers. "There was one day where there were two that happened at the same time," says McDermott, who's personally witnessed three people fall to their deaths. "Another time, word going around was that there were seven in seven days. It varies. It's common enough that when you've been there a while it's not, unfortunately, as shocking."

Friends & family

It's a Saturday night in Upper Tantallon and the parking lot of the St. Margaret Centre is packed. The Junior B hockey season has just begun and the hometown Bay Ducks are up against the Sackville Blazers. The scene at the entranceway is pure small-town Canadiana: heavysset men in flannel jackets and ball caps, fleece-swaddled hockey mums, gaggles of giggling teens decked out in gangsta wear and wallet chains. It's just an exhibition game tonight, but the arena is nearly full: the crowd has come to pay respects to one of its own.

"About 200 more than we usually expect," says Tim Hill, president of the Ducks and chair of the centre's board of directors. As a hockey player, Adam Cashen, with his tough, scrappy style, was a crowd favourite. "He was cheeky," says Hill.

Adam and his family were stalwarts of the Bay area hockey scene. Adam's dad, Brian Cashen, coached the Ducks to an Atlantic championship during their first season in existence, with both Adam and his older brother Michael playing on the team. This year, Adam was set to be one of the Duck's leading players. "He would have been a star," says Hill. Instead, the Ducks' new jerseys bear a logo with Adam's number, 24, and his nickname, Elmo.

Seated in the stands are perhaps a dozen of Adam's close friends---kids he grew up with. The girls are wearing Sesame Street Elmo t-shirts, decorated with phrases like "You're our Angel." Like most people in this small, close-knit community, they are utterly baffled that Adam Cashen, of all people, could have taken his own life. "No one could have ever imagined him doing it," says Bobby Jo Gore, who has known Adam since grade two.

As the Ducks take to the ice, Hill's voice comes over the loudspeakers: "Welcome to the first annual Adam Cashen Memorial Exhibition game."

Adam's house is just down the road from the arena. When I drive up the week before the game, I'm greeted at the door by Steve Yzerman, the Cashens' excitable poodle-terrier mix. Adam's mom, Carol, a trim, petite woman in her mid-forties, bustles over and ushers me in. "Would you like a glass of pop?" she offers. Carol is a nurse in the dialysis unit at the QEII, though she hasn't gone back to work since her son's death.

The house is quiet and dark. Brian, a big man with a square, goateed jaw, is on the couch in the living room, watching a Blue Jays game on a widescreen plasma TV, the green of the baseball diamond flickering against his face. "Come in, my friend, come in," he tells me. "Sit down."

As Carol brings over a glass of Diet Coke and some potato chips, Michael, Adam's older brother, comes into the room and kisses his mother on the cheek---he's going out for the evening with some friends. "Bye, pop," he says.

"Drive careful," Brian replies, watching his son as he goes out the door.

Adam's death has devastated his family. Carol, unable to be around the sick and dying, is switching professions. Brian has taken up smoking again. Michael, unable to concentrate, dropped out of university last semester. "He has a lot of bad dreams," says Carol, "about trying to save his brother."

They are struggling to understand how an intelligent and popular child like Adam could have suddenly taken his own life. "If my son can do what he did," says Brian, "then there's not a child on this planet who couldn't do it." Since that morning on the bridge they have been sifting through the days, months and years leading up to Adam's suicide, searching for clues to its mystery. They've found little in the way of answers.

"What really drives me crazy," Carol says, "is that Adam is no different than a lot of kids that are facing the same struggles. Why is it that some commit suicide and some don't?"

By all accounts, Adam was an extraordinarily extroverted young man, blessed with a gift for making people laugh and endowed with a sunny self-confidence that allowed him to make new friends with ease.

At parties, Adam would frequently pull stunts to ensure he was the centre of attention. "He loved being naked for some reason," laughs Larissa Reardon, who grew up with Adam. "He loved showing his butt off, taking his shirt off." On YouTube, she says, you can still find a video of him eating a June bug at a party as a roomful of people cheer him on.

Adam was impulsive and hyperactive to the extreme. As a child, he had been diagnosed with ADHD and his parents had reluctantly put him on Ritalin. This helped him to concentrate in school and he graduated as an honours student. In sports, he was extremely competitive and hated to lose, perhaps because he felt overshadowed by his older brother---a gifted athlete. "He had to win everything. He was mad at himself if he didn't," says Carol.

Despite his appetite for rough sports and party antics, Adam had a softer side to him, says his mother. "He was sensitive, more than what his friends knew. He had a little pet rat and when it died he cried. He was probably 14. Yeah, he was a softie." When, in grade 10, his grandfather died, Adam manifested a sort of fearful preoccupation with death. "He took that really hard," Carol says. "At night he became really fearful---it was like he was scared to close his eyes."

Suicide myths & barriers

In March 2004, the Macdonald Bridge made national headlines when renowned eco-activist Tooker Goomberg committed suicide by jumping from it. Tooker and his wife Angela Bischoff had moved to Dartmouth a few months prior to his death, and each day he would bicycle across the bridge to visit her at her workplace in Halifax. Tooker was suffering from depression and, after being prescribed antidepressants, had been experiencing agitated and suicidal thoughts. One evening, coming back from Halifax, he parked his bike on the bridge and hopped over the railing. His body, swept away by currents, was never found.

"I believe that had there been a suicide barrier on that bridge, Tooker would still be alive today," Angela Bischoff tells me. "Suicide is a very impulsive act."

The concept of a suicide barrier---that is, a fence or wire netting that prevents people from jumping---is not a new one. Barriers have existed for decades at notorious suicide destinations like the Empire State Building and Japan's volcanic Mt. Mihara. Recent years, however, have seen their increasingly widespread adoption on bridges and other publicly accessed high places. In Canada, the Bloor Street Viaduct in Toronto and the Jacques Cartier Bridge in Montreal are among high-profile locations that have recently installed suicide barriers.

In most cases, such barriers are the result of long, uphill battles on the part of activist coalitions. In addition to concerns over cost, effectiveness, aesthetics and engineering difficulties, proponents of suicide barriers face a basic, seemingly commonsensical argument: that the suicidal will simply find other ways to end their lives.

"That's just not true," says Dr. Antoon Leenaars, a certain note of frustration entering his voice. "Barriers save lives." Dr. Leenaars is one of Canada's leading experts in the field of suicide prevention. A past president of both the Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention and the American Association of Suicidology, Dr. Leenaars runs a psychiatric practice in Windsor, Ontario, where he sees daily the toll that mental illness and suicide can exact on individuals and their communities.

This erroneous but common-sense argument, Dr. Leenaars says, is derived from the misconception

that suicide cannot be prevented. "Suicide is not inevitable," he says. "I mean, in a certain group of people it's inevitable. There is no way that you can prevent all suicides. But most people who are suicidal are quite ambivalent and their suicidal state doesn't last forever---it's a short burst."

A 1978 study by suicidologist Richard Seiden that found that of 515 people prevented from jumping from the Golden Gate Bridge, only 25 would later go on to kill themselves. This and other studies suggest that, in certain cases, while a short-term crisis or trigger incident may temporarily put someone in a "zone" of suicide risk, if that period passes without a successful attempt the person may not attempt suicide again. This is why Dr. Leenaars and other experts believe that barriers can prevent suicides. Indeed, bridge barriers are just one example of a suicide prevention strategy known as "means restriction," which limits access to firearms, poisons, prescription drugs and high places.

The premise behind means restriction is twofold: firstly, it makes it harder for people who are experiencing a short-term crisis to gain access to a method of suicide, and secondly, it pushes people towards less-lethal methods (like an overdose of pills) that give them a better chance of survival. Youth suicide, with its impulsivity and high rate of attempts to completions, may be particularly responsive to this strategy.

Means restriction is in fact one of the few suicide prevention strategies that has shown evidence of success. Programs restricting access to coke-gas ovens in Britain, toxic pesticides in Asia and firearms in Canada have all been linked to decreases in those countries' overall suicide rates.

"It is clearly one of the that has the most unequivocal evidence," says Dr. Leenaars. "The data on the barriers is not hard and fast yet, but on other things, like gun control, like poisons, it's unequivocal at this point."

The converse is that the presence of readily available means can contribute to suicide. Researchers have long argued that the presence of what psychologist Armin Schmidke called "suicide hot-spots" in a community can actually increase the suicide rate. "Hot-spots are these places like Niagara Falls and the Golden Gate Bridge that are inviting and lethal, which is why people go there," Dr. Leenaars says. "These are environmental things that increase the risk of suicide." A 2006 World Health Organization report estimated that "globally, an average of 30 percent of all suicides were attributable to the environment," a category that included the presence of available means.

A 2007 internal bridge commission document obtained by The Coast under the Freedom of Information Act notes: "The Angus L. Macdonald Bridge is a recognized 'hot-spot' for suicidal behaviour in HRM."

The challenge of life

When he graduated from high school in 2006, Adam enrolled in the Commerce program at Saint Mary's University. After a couple months, he dropped out. He was impatient with school and wanted to go out west and earn money. "He was going to work the oil rigs," Brian says. "He was going to prove to us that he could succeed, without going to school."

Adam flew out to Calgary, but his stay was short-lived. A friend of his stood him up at the airport and the job he had lined up fell through. He spent a week living in a hotel room on his parents' credit card, fruitlessly searching for work on the rigs. "Everything just went to shit," says Brian. "So I told him, you know, things aren't working out. I miss you, I want you home, let me buy you your airplane ticket."

Adam returned home crestfallen. "He set himself up for failure because his expectations were so high," says Carol. "I rode him hard about quitting school," says Brian. He made Adam work to pay back the tuition and the expenses he had incurred in Calgary. "And very diligently, he did that."

In January 2007, three of Adam's friends were killed in a car accident. Adam had been especially close to one them, Ellen Campbell. Carol noticed a resurgence of his fearful behaviour at night. One day, not long after the accident, she came home from work and found Adam drunk in the house. "I thought he was acting. He was banging into walls and crying. I was so upset because he was so drunk," recalls Carol. "He said to me: 'Mum, you just don't understand what's going on in my head.'"

When Brian came home, he too got angry at Adam for being so drunk. Adam then pulled on a parka and stormed outside into the sub-zero night, saying "I just want to go."

"I don't know if Brian had a feeling," Carol says, "but he went out and got him and put him to bed."

Adam kept quiet about these feelings with his friends. "That brought him down a lot, I think," says Larissa Reardon of Ellen's death. "He still never showed it, but we knew."

At the end of January, Carol and Brian separated, with Carol moving next door to her sister's house. Adam was angry with his mother for moving out. "He didn't speak to me for three weeks," Carol says.

Around this time, Adam's drinking and partying intensified, though he had always been heavily into both. "Adam was very much like his father and Brian was a heavy, heavy drinker," says Carol. She says Adam once told her he had started drinking at 12, perhaps jokingly, but she first noticed it as a problem around 16. He had seen a counsellor a few times about it. She speculates that it might have been a form of self-medication for his ADHD. Adam only took his medication for school and had stopped taking it after leaving Saint Mary's. "When he drank, it slowed him down," Carol tells me.

In April, Carol moved back in. "It was like, Mom was back and the party was over," recalls Carol. Adam, fed up with his parents' demands that he cut back on his partying, moved out and spent three weeks at Larissa's house.

When he came back home, Adam tried to turn over a new leaf. He made plans to return to Saint Mary's in the fall. He finished paying back his parents. He even tried to curtail his drinking. The weekend before his death, he visited PEI with some new friends he had made sailing. "I remember him coming home," Carol says, "and saying 'you know what mom, I'm going to stop drinking, I had such a great weekend and I didn't drink.'"

Brian was pleased with Adam's progress. Two nights before Adam's death, Brian picked his son up from work. He remembers the conversation they had, word for word. "I looked at him," Brian recalls, "and said 'you know what Adam, I am so proud of you. You're playing the best hockey I've ever seen you play and you've paid me back all the money you owe me.'"

"Everything seemed to be going right for Adam," Carol says.

The partial truth about barriers

In August last summer, workers completed a steel extension along the outer railings of the bicycle and pedestrian walkways of the Macdonald Bridge. Ten feet high, with an inward-curving top section, the barriers seem nearly impossible to scale. They run for 357 metres, out past the end of the Navy dockyards, before ending abruptly over the water's edge---right about where Adam jumped. Beyond there, for the rest of the bridge's 1.3km span, nothing impedes the magnificent view from the walkway, both of Halifax Harbour and of the dizzying vertical drop below.

This partial barrier is a result of a 2004 lawsuit, filed by the Department of National Defence, alleging that the bridge commission had reneged on a previous agreement to protect DND workers from falling objects. Steve Snider, the commission's CEO, claims the barriers, which cost \$500,000, are not intended to prevent suicides. "It's to protect people who work at the Department of National Defence from objects that are thrown or falling from the bridge," he says.

Falling objects such as jumpers? "Yes," says Snider. Indeed, court files relating to the lawsuit describe a number of documents relating to jumpers and property damage exchanged between the commission and the DND. (The commission denied a request for those documents.)

Angela Bischoff finds the partial barrier difficult to swallow. After her husband Tooker's death she had met with Snider to lobby for a suicide prevention barrier and was told that the bridge could not bear the weight. "They said at the time that it was undoable for technical or engineering reasons, and I knew it wasn't true because they have been putting up suicide barriers on other bridges," she says. "But it was proven to be untrue when they were forced by the courts to put it up and they were able to do so."

Snider says that while a partial barrier was feasible, a full-length one is not. "Based on the engineering that's been done, we are not able to accommodate that type of weight on the entire structure," he says. "This is a long-standing opinion."

"I'm surprised to hear that," says Morgan Yolles, when I relate the bridge commission's stance to him. Yolles---who, as the founder of the famed Yolles engineering firm and a member of the Order of Canada, is regarded as one of the country's most influential structural engineers---helped design the Luminous Veil, a prevention barrier on Toronto's Bloor Street Viaduct, long an infamous suicide spot. "I would be sceptical that it would not be possible to provide a suicide barrier along that bridge," Yolles tells me. "Without knowing all the details I can't really say, but the weight of the barrier is not great."

The Luminous Veil, designed jointly by Yolles and architect Derek Revington, was completed in 2003 and has garnered numerous accolades for its aesthetic beauty and innovative design. Composed of stainless-steel rods, the structure has proven effective at preventing suicides at its location: The viaduct recorded 480 suicides between 1918 and 2003 and, since the installation of the Luminous Veil, none.

"Of course the cost is significant," Yolles says, referring to the Veil's \$5.5 million price tag. "It would probably be more for the suspension bridge---it's a lot longer."

Less expensive, but still lightweight, options do exist, though they may not be as attractive as the Luminous Veil. At the Golden Gate Bridge, long infamous as the world's number one suicide

location, officials had previously rejected a barrier based on weight restrictions. However, in 1998, a cattle-fence company called Z-Clip offered the Golden Gate Bridge a barrier composed of high-tension wires. Though the barrier was studied and found to be both effective and within weight requirements, it was rejected on the basis of aesthetics, with one bridge board member reportedly complaining that the fence resembled "the barbed wire at a concentration camp." (Currently, in response to media and activist pressure, the Golden Gate Bridge is funding a new study that is considering barriers similar to those partially in place on the Macdonald Bridge.)

Snider says that he's unfamiliar with the Z-Clip fencing proposal, but he says that aesthetics would not be a factor the commission would take into account. "We are looking at re-decking the Macdonald Bridge within the next five to six years," he tells me, "and it is our hope that at that point we'll be able to look at adding an extension the entire way across."

Snider points out that other prevention measures exist on the bridge, such as closed-circuit television cameras and emergency phones. He says that some bridge police are trained in suicide intervention. "If we believe that somebody is considering suicide," he says, "we simply approach them and ask them the question."

The last day

On the evening before his death, Adam came home from work and sat down for supper with his family. As it was being served, he remarked that it was the anniversary of a co-worker's brother's suicide---the man had been caught cheating on his wife. "I remember saying to Adam 'that's no way to end your life, over a woman,'" recalls Brian. "His response was 'you're right.'"

After dinner, Adam went outside and cut the lawn. As Brian stood out in the warm summer evening's glow, watching his son, Adam's phone rang. Brian picked it up. "It's Yo-yo," Brian called out. "He wants you to go wakeboarding."

Brian remembers each subsequent detail clearly. "He came up, gave me a hug and a kiss, got in the car and I watched him drive out of the driveway. That's the last I ever saw of him."

After he finished wakeboarding, Adam came home to find the house empty. He decided to call up a friend, Darryl Benoit, and head out for a night on the town.

The evening was a typical one, Darryl tells me. He and Adam drove downtown in Adam's beat-up red Corolla, eventually ending up at the Dome Nightclub where they roamed the bar, socializing. Sometime after midnight, they paired off with two women. Darryl guesses that he and Adam each had about "10-plus, but not much more" drinks. Around 3am, feeling drunk, Darryl decided to go home, leaving Adam with the woman he had met.

When the bar closed down at 3:30am, Adam got in his car with the woman and her friend and headed to a party. He was stopped by police on Herring Cove Road, where his car was found the next morning. After refusing to take a breathalyser test, he was arrested and taken to the Brunswick station by police.

Adam had a "novice" driver's licence, which meant his legal limit for alcohol was zero. He had also accumulated enough demerits from speeding and seatbelt tickets that any further points would have resulted in his licence being revoked---a major problem for him since he relied on his car to get to work and school.

Around 4:30am, Adam called Tim Hill, the president of the Bay Ducks. Hill, who is a Halifax-based lawyer, wouldn't comment on the conversation, citing attorney-client privilege, but according to Adam's parents, Hill advised Adam to refuse the breathalyser and told him "he'd get him off." About an hour later, Adam was let out of the station and called Hill. They arranged to meet in the afternoon to discuss the charge.

"I think everything was running through head," says Brian, "how he didn't know how to come home and tell me that he got pulled over, that he wasn't going to be able to get to work that day, not being able to drive from Tantallon to Saint Mary's."

At 6am, Carol was awoken by the sound of her phone vibrating. She figured that it was the understaffed hospital calling her in and, having worked overtime the day before, decided to ignore it.

Adam then called a few friends, but no one was awake at that hour. He left messages, where, crying, he apologized and professed his love. He text messaged his brother: "I love you bud, I'm so sorry." Then, at 6:26am, he text-messaged his mother a final time. Hearing her phone vibrate again, Carol decided to take a look. It was a text message from her son: "mummy, mummy, I'm so sorry, I love you forever, I'm so sorry." Carol clicked to the first message. It said "under my bed."

She started screaming for her husband to get up. They couldn't get through to Adam's phone. Brian ran into Adam's room and flipped up the mattress: There was a one-page letter and a small piece of yellow cord tied in the shape of a noose.

"I knew then that we were in fucking trouble," says Brian. He woke Adam's brother, Michael, up and together they jumped into the car and raced into town, not knowing where they were heading. While speeding down the highway, Michael tried Adam's phone again. This time a police officer answered and said that he was on the Macdonald Bridge and that Brian and Michael had better come down.

"Michael freaked out in the car, lost it," Brian says of Michael's reaction. "He said 'on the bridge' and I said 'Mikey, he's not on the bridge, the cop answered the phone, he's already gone.'"

Missed opportunities?

The Cashens have now joined the ranks of those haunted by the bridge. "When you come into the airport, there's a model of it," Carol says. "When you open a book about Halifax, it's always in there. I wish it was blown up, to tell you the truth."

But these days, what bothers her most is the possibility that an opportunity was missed by the bridge commission to save Adam's life. Since his suicide, evidence has come to light that suggests Adam spent a half-hour on the bridge and that the commission was warned during that time that he was a potential suicide risk---evidence that raises questions about the effectiveness of suicide prevention measures currently in place on the bridge.

John Blandin, a retired firefighter, who walks the bridge each morning, says he saw Adam near the Halifax side of the bridge (he later confirmed it was him through photos).

"I saw him coming my way," Blandin tells me, "He looked a little distraught. I said 'Hello, are you OK?' He said 'yeah' and just walked past me."

Plagued by a feeling that something wasn't right, Blandin went down and spoke to the bridge commissioners, the first time he's ever done so.

"I mentioned to the commissioner that there's a young fella on the bridge who looks a little distraught," Blandin says, "and he said that he was aware of him, that they knew where he was."

Blandin says he normally reaches the Halifax side "around ten after six." He estimates he saw Adam around then and that he spoke to a commissioner on the Halifax side soon afterwards. According to phone logs, Adam jumped at 6:36am, which suggests he was on the bridge about 30 minutes before jumping, during which time bridge security was made aware of him.

Snider, the commission's CEO, will not discuss the incident. "I will not speak about specifics," he tells me. According to Carol, who met with him in November to discuss the incident, Snider admitted to her that commissioners had been warned about Adam by Blandin. In fact, she says, Snider told her a car had been dispatched at 6:20am to look for Adam, however the car was told to "look for him on the bike lane" and drove the length of the bridge without spotting him---something that baffled her and for which she received no explanation. Moreover, she was told Adam had not been visible on camera because he had been in a "blind spot" on the bridge (the cameras were designed primarily for traffic-flow monitoring).

Angela Bischoff, too, questions the effectiveness of the system. "After Tooker died," she says, "I spent so many hours on that bridge, completely distressed, bawling my eyes out, considering jumping off myself. Nobody ever approached me."

Snider declined to comment on how many of the bridge security staff are trained in suicide prevention, or on what that training consists of. The commission denied The Coast's request under the Freedom of Information Act for information about bridge suicide prevention measures on the grounds that doing so "would facilitate the circumvention of those measures."

Bridge workers do perform successful interventions, though Snider will not say how many. "We have a lot of successes," he tells me. Last September, two commissioners received awards for their role in saving a woman's life by preventing her from jumping.

If Adam had been halted by bridge security, he might have received life-saving help. But what if he had simply found a barrier---would he have gone elsewhere? The letter under his bed---which apologizes for his action and expresses his love for friends and family---indicates that he had been thinking of suicide prior to being arrested that night, thoughts that he somehow hid from his family and closest friends.

"Maybe he would have found something else," says Carol. "Maybe he would have got through the night if the bridge hadn't been there. I'm not sure."

There's no way to know for sure if a bridge barrier might have saved Adam and even strong advocates for barriers, like Dr. Leenaars, admit that means restriction can only be a partial solution to the problem of suicide. "It's not enough to put up a barrier," he says. "Suicide is complex and so the solutions have to be complex."

Regardless of what a barrier might have accomplished, Carol feels that an opportunity was missed

by the bridge security that morning. "The more I think about it," she tells me, "the more I realize that Adam could have been given a second chance."

Death, and life

As the clock runs down at the St. Margaret's Arena, the Bay Ducks are ahead. One of the mothers says some of the players are planning fights in honour of Adam's scrappy style and, sure enough, in the final minutes of the third period, three fights break out in rapid succession. The buzzer sounds and the first annual Adam Cashen Memorial Exhibition Game comes to an end. When I last see Brian and Carol, they're standing in the lobby surrounded by friends. A woman asks Carol how she's doing.

"Shitty," Carol replies, then laughs. "I've decided not to say I'm good."

Outside, Adam's friends disperse chatting excitedly into their cellphones. It's a Saturday night, after all, and they have the resilience of youth on their side. A hum of excitement pervades the air as knots of laughing teens form on the sidewalk, while off to the side young lovers entwine fingers beneath the orange glow of the streetlamps. Life rushes on, and these kids will one day grow old and have kids of their own to fret over and dote on. Only one will stay young, tanned to the golden hue of his 19th summer. Adam will always be Elmo. *For more on Adam Cashen and his story, see cbc.ca's coverage of Adam's story at <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/nova-scotia/story/2008/02/07/cashen-bridge.html>.*