



Left: Conner, Erica Gifford Mills' son, an active-duty U.S. Marine who lost his life to suicide.



Right: Author Kim Burditt Bartlett (left) and her younger brother Jon, who died by suicide.



★ BLACK BOX PROJECT® ★

THE BLACK BOX PROJECT

Turning suicide loss into legacy, and grief into purpose.

BY KIM BURDITT BARTLETT

When my younger brother Jon died by suicide in 2010, our lives shifted overnight. The shock, confusion and grief reshaped everything we thought we knew. In the months and years that followed, we relentlessly asked ourselves: What led him to that moment? Why didn't he come to us? Could we have done more?

These questions are not unique to my family. The quiet companions of many suicide-loss survivors, they often linger long after the funeral service has ended and the rest of the world has returned to its routine. As funeral professionals know, grief does not end when the doors close and the last car leaves the lot.

This personal loss – and the support my family received in the aftermath – eventually guided me into suicide prevention and “postvention” work. Today,

I serve as senior manager of family engagement for the Black Box Project, a groundbreaking data initiative by Stop Soldier Suicide, a national nonprofit. In this role, I have the honor of working with families that are navigating suicide loss, supporting them as they process their grief, and – if and when they choose – helping them transform that loss into meaning, legacy and hope for others.

What Is the Black Box Project?

The Black Box Project seeks to better understand suicide risk through the ethical, anonymized analysis of digital data from the personal devices of individuals who die by suicide. The Black Box Project originated with families with military connections, but participation is now open to families of all backgrounds.

Our goal is not to examine individual cases or determine why a specific suicide occurred. Instead, the Black Box Project looks collectively at patterns, behaviors and signals that could help researchers, clinicians and prevention leaders better understand suicide risk. The team pays special attention to signals that often go undetected in traditional reviews. By examining this data with cutting-edge technology and data science, we are able to see the pathways and journeys that lead to suicide and, as a result, improve suicide prevention.

Just as importantly, the Black Box Project is grounded in a family-centered, trauma-informed approach. Participation is always voluntary. Families retain choice, agency and control throughout the entire process. Personal identifiers are removed, and de-

vices are securely handled and returned according to the family's wishes. The Black Box Project exists at the intersection of research and reverence.

More Than Research

When family members choose to participate in the Black Box Project, they loan us their loved one's device with the understanding that they will not receive answers about their loved one specifically. There are no individual reports, no explanations, no conclusions drawn about cause or contributing factors. Yet many families tell us the process is profoundly meaningful. Families often share that participation helps them:

- **Reclaim agency** at a time when so much feels out of their control
- **Honor their loved one's life** by contributing information that could save others
- **Find relief from self-blame** and understand that suicide often stems from hidden suffering
- **Feel less alone**, thanks to this growing community – united by loss, connected by purpose, and committed to prevention and understanding

For many, the Black Box Project transforms a devastating loss into a living legacy – one rooted in dignity, compassion and purpose.

A Parent's Perspective

To understand why this work resonates so deeply with families, it's helpful to

hear directly from those who have lived it.

Erica Gifford Mills is the mother of Conner, an active-duty U.S. Marine whose life was lost to suicide. She is also the founder of Balanced Symmetree and an advocate of military mental health. Her reflections speak to the role funeral professionals play – and why initiatives such as the Black Box Project matter long after formal services conclude.

She shared the following:

"I didn't choose this path because it aligned with my career.

"I chose it because it became part of my life.

"I am the mother of Conner, an active-duty U.S. Marine whose life was lost far too soon. In the days, weeks and months that followed his passing, I learned something many funeral directors already understand deeply: Grief does not end at the service. For families affected by suicide, especially military suicide, the questions linger long after the last car leaves the parking lot.

"Why didn't we see it? Could something have been done differently? Who failed them – or failed to hear them? Was it me?"

"Those questions don't fade. They root themselves into the hearts of families.

"That is why I chose to support the work of Stop Soldier Suicide and the Black Box Project.

"This initiative approaches suicide prevention with the same reverence and responsibility that funeral professionals bring to honoring a life. The Black Box Project seeks to understand the full story behind each loss – not

to assign blame but to identify patterns, system gaps and missed opportunities so future lives can be saved. It treats each life lost to suicide with dignity and ensures their story matters beyond the moment of death. Just as importantly, the grace, compassion and authenticity showed to me as a parent mattered deeply.

"After losing Conner, I made a decision that many questioned: I returned to school and earned a master's degree in military psychology – not because I needed another credential but because I needed understanding. I wanted to look beyond grief and into the systems, culture and psychological realities our service members face. What I learned confirmed what my heart already knew: Suicide is not inevitable, and prevention must be informed, compassionate and proactive.

"Funeral directors are uniquely positioned in this work.

The Black Box Project exists at the intersection of research and reverence.

"You are often the first professionals families encounter after loss. You are trusted. You listen when others don't know what to say. You witness not just death but also the aftermath, the silence and the unanswered questions. Your role places you at a powerful intersection of care, dignity and opportunity for connection.

"Learning about efforts like Stop Soldier Suicide and

the Black Box Project gives funeral professionals another option to be aware of – one that some families might later find meaningful as part of their own healing or desire to create purpose from loss. For some families, being offered a resource like the Black Box Project can open a path toward hope and legacy, allowing their loved one's life to continue to matter through contribution to prevention ...

“This work is personal for

me. It is also purposeful. I honor my son by standing for those still here and by working alongside professionals like you, who understand that caring for the living is just as important as honoring the dead.”

Simply being seen, heard and granted agency is, in itself, a powerful form of support.

Compassionate Support – With Clear Boundaries

From the first contact onward, the Black Box Project team approaches families with sensitivity, respect and clarity. We guide families gently through the process, answer questions transparently, and share grief- and trauma-informed resources when helpful. We also provide referrals to trusted support organizations when families want additional care.

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It is important to be clear about what the Black Box Project is – and what it is not.

The Black Box Project is not a clinical service, therapy program or grief-counseling provider. We do not analyze individual cases or offer interpretations of loved ones' behaviors. Instead, we offer families a safe, respectful space rooted in dignity, privacy and choice – and an opportunity to contribute to prevention efforts in a way that aligns with their values and readiness.

Many families tell us that simply being seen, heard and granted agency is, in itself, a powerful form of support.

The Black Box Project is never something to “sell” or push. It is an option – offered gently and with respect for timing and choice.

Why Funeral Professionals Matter in This Work

As Erica Gifford Mills so powerfully shared, funeral professionals stand beside families during the most vulnerable moments of their lives. You witness love, trauma, regret, confusion and longing – oftentimes all at once. You hold space for questions that might never be answered.

For families navigating suicide loss, those questions can feel especially heavy. The Black Box Project – whether introduced during arrangements or as part of aftercare – offers something different: possibility, a path to mean-

ing, a way to honor a life while giving hope to others.

The Black Box Project aligns closely with the values funeral professionals uphold every day:

- **Dignity and respect** for the deceased
- **Compassionate care** for survivors
- **Community responsibility** that extends beyond the immediate moment

Importantly, the Black Box Project is never something to “sell” or push. It is an option – offered gently and with respect for timing and choice.

Ways to Introduce the Black Box Project

Funeral professionals can support families by:

- 1. Mentioning it softly**, either during arrangements or in follow-up conversations. E.g., “Some families that experience suicide loss find meaning in participating in a research initiative called the Black Box Project. If you’d like, I can share information when the time feels right.”
- 2. Including the Black Box Project** in aftercare packets or on suicide-loss resource lists.
- 3. Requesting materials or guidance** from the Black Box Project team. We’re happy to provide brochures, language suggestions and context.
- 4. Connecting the Black Box Project with community support**

groups and survivor organizations you already trust.

What matters most is awareness and choice. Sometimes simply planting a seed is enough.

A Shared Commitment

As funeral professionals, you honor lives with care and dignity in the moments just after heartbreaking loss. Offering a way to transform grief into purpose, the Black Box Project exists to walk beside grieving families beyond those initial moments.

By working together, we can help ensure that lives lost to suicide are not reduced to silence or stigma but instead remembered as part of a broader effort to protect others.

If you would like more information or to explore collaboration, you are welcome to connect with the Black Box Project team at blackboxproject@stopsoldiersuicide.org. Or visit BBXProject.org. We are honored to work alongside you to create meaning, support healing and save lives. ☰

Kim Burditt Bartlett, MSW, is the senior manager of family engagement for Stop Soldier Suicide’s Black Box Project. A suicide-loss survivor herself, she has worked in suicide prevention, intervention and “postvention” for more than a decade. Burditt Bartlett is passionate about supporting families with dignity, choice and compassion while helping transform loss into meaning and prevention.