



In the Shadow of the Mountains

Emblematic of rugged individualism, the American West today endures shockingly high suicide rates—a situation one Colorado program aims to address.

BY **CHRIS POMORSKI**



Telluride, Colorado is a postcard-perfect ski town of some 2,500 residents who have an alarmingly common habit of dying by suicide. It's a tendency they share with inhabitants of other Western ski areas—Aspen; Jackson Hole, Wyoming; Sun Valley, Idaho—and, more broadly, with people in the Mountain West, that vaguely top-hat-shape cluster including Idaho, Utah, Wyoming, Montana, Colorado and Nevada. By some estimates—and for reasons that remain largely mysterious—it has been the most suicidal region of the country for more than 100 years, or roughly since white migrants settled there in earnest.

Telluride lies in the southwest corner of the state, in a box canyon hemmed in by 13,000-foot Rocky Mountain peaks. Until the Rio Grande Southern Railroad arrived in the early 1890s, its isolation was acute. Between 1890 and 1895, a gold boom more than tripled the population. Financiers such as John D. Rockefeller and Harry Whitney poured in capital. But the worm soon turned. A brutal labor conflict—and gold discoveries elsewhere—sapped Telluride's allure. By 1970 fewer than 600 people lived there.

Around 1975 three friends, high school seniors, began making regular trips to Telluride from Tucson, where they lived. Tom Slocum was a soft-spoken tennis star with blond hair, blue eyes and a subtle wit. Slocum had been friends with Tony Daranyi since middle school, when Daranyi's family moved to the Southwest from Peru. Bradley Steele made the trips possible—his parents had recently built a house in Telluride. The drive from Tucson took about 11 hours. En route they listened to Led Zeppelin, Lynyrd Skynyrd and the Who, tracing back roads through tribal lands of the Hopi, Navajo and Ute.

Telluride offered attractive seclusion. A few prospectors remained, but the old miners' cabins were largely occupied by countercultural types: hippies, bikers, outdoorsy hermits, druggy trustafarians. Only Main Street was paved. "Few people had heard of it," Daranyi says. "When you arrived, you felt like you'd discovered a paradise." The friends backpacked, rafted, climbed and skied. The community was warm, welcoming and inspiring. Daranyi and Slocum made a pact to return for good as adults.

Around 1985, when they were in their mid-20s, they followed through. Slocum had been working at a golf shop in Los Angeles, Daranyi as an investment banker in Chicago. To recalibrate their bearings—to leave the "real world" behind—they spent time

trekking on mountain bikes and camping in the desert. "Investment banking was a real dog-eat-dog existence," Daranyi recalls. "I had to heal myself, purge the demons. We used to say we were dropping out but dropping in. Dropping out of society but dropping into something much more special."

Soon they were sharing a rented house with Laurel Robinson, an ex-stockbroker originally from Atlanta, and a man named Marv Kirk, a math teacher of unassuming brilliance who could single-handedly defeat teams of 10 at Trivial Pursuit. They found work at a weekly paper—Slocum in the ad department, Daranyi as a reporter—rare white-collar jobs in a catch-as-catch-can economy dominated by restaurant and construction gigs. Although Telluride's new residents differed in many ways from the miners they'd replaced, they shared with them a frontier spirit—a sense of having come from elsewhere, often a great distance, forgoing physical comforts for earthier purposes.

"It was 800 people climbing, skiing, running rivers, playing cards and passing the same 20-dollar bill around," says Lance Waring, a friend of Slocum's and Daranyi's who moved to Telluride around the same time. Todd Creel, another friend, adds, "There was no class system. Everyone was here for the same reason." Potlucks, costume parties, ski burns—ceremonial pyres lit to call down snow—and liberal drug use defined the era. "My rent was \$100 a month," Waring says. "The economics allowed you the luxury of making a tremendous connection with the community."

Among a cohort of explorers and free spirits, many of whom passed up family life in favor of adventure, Slocum stood out for his

self-containment. He spent whole summers alone, camping out of his car. "He wanted to keep his life really simple," Daranyi says. "Fishing and camping on his way to go golfing would be his idea of a perfect weekend." After two of Slocum's brothers died—one a victim of AIDS, the other of a car accident—he didn't much discuss the events. In the early 2000s, friends were surprised when Slocum moved in with a girlfriend in Rico, about a 40-minute drive from Telluride. At Creel's weekly poker games—where Slocum was a regular, reading opponents skillfully and folding often—he acquired a new nickname: Loverboy. "He was glowing," Creel recalls. But the relationship ended, and Slocum returned to Telluride, eventually occupying a caretaker's apartment owned by a friend. The town had become glitzy and high-priced, and many in his circle had left. In the following years he withdrew from those who remained, drinking beer alone in his apartment. His legs bothered him, making him less able to participate in the adventure sports he loved. One morning in February 2016, when he was 57, he hiked to a picturesque spot above town, sat down and shot himself in the head.

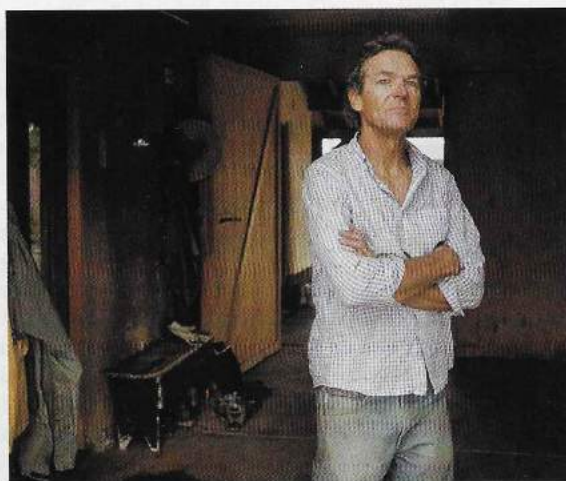
Slocum was one of six people to kill themselves that year in San Miguel County, where Telluride is by far the most populous community, making suicide responsible for nearly a quarter of the county's 25 deaths in 2016. When I visit Emil Sante, the county coroner since 2011, at his Telluride home in August, he is mourning Jim Guest, who took his own life in July at the age of 73. A charter member of Telluride's ski patrol, Guest had been locally beloved. His suicide—the county's third in 2018—shook the town. As we sit on Sante's deck, he reviews the explanations

often offered for the Mountain West's suicide problem: a cult of rugged individualism coupled with limited mental health services, the increased cost of living that has attended the development of luxury resorts, geographic isolation, changes to brain chemistry brought on by high altitudes. But Sante rejects such neat formulas.

"There is something to it," he says. "I just don't know what it is."

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The rate at which Americans end their own lives increased nearly 30 percent between 1999 and 2016, according to a June 2018 report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The data break down along familiar lines, with Native American men aged 25 to 44 and white men aged 45 to 64 accounting for the highest



Tony Daranyi at his Norwood, Colorado farm.



rates of self-inflicted death. But suicide among women increased dramatically too. It's the nation's 10th-leading cause of death, one of just three—alongside unintentional injuries and Alzheimer's—that are increasing. In 2016 nearly 45,000 Americans took their own lives, and the recent suicides of prominent figures—Robin Williams, Anthony Bourdain, Kate Spade—have drawn public attention to the issue.

The motivations for suicide represent a notoriously unnavigable archipelago of personal turmoil, ambient ills and opaque logic. Experts caution against attributing a suicide—let alone thousands of them—to any one cause. Yet in the U.S., suicide has long been framed primarily as a mental health issue. Literature on the subject often proceeds from the assumption that some 90 percent of suicide victims can be shown, based on psychological autopsy studies, to have suffered from mental illness. We have thus understood suicide largely as the desperate recourse of unsound minds, and prevention efforts focus overwhelmingly on mental health, often emphasizing crisis intervention: hotlines, tips on recognizing distress, how to talk to a suicidal friend.

Against that backdrop, it's striking that the CDC study cautions that “approximately half of suicide decedents...did not have a known mental health condition.” America, the report urges, needs a radically more diversified, public-health-based approach to suicide prevention. But in addition to discrete goals with self-evident relevance to suicide—reducing substance abuse and access to guns, increasing access to counseling—the CDC prescribes complex, politically sensitive initiatives that span urban planning, education and civic engagement: “strengthening economic supports (e.g., housing stabilization policies, household financial support); teaching coping and problem-solving skills to manage everyday stressors and prevent future relationship problems...promoting social connectedness to increase a sense of belonging and access to informational, tangible, emotional and social support.”

Experts emphasize that among suicidal thinkers, external factors tend to overlap with mental health struggles. Christine Moutier, the chief medical officer at the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, tells me, “People who are in a state of well mental health don't think about ending their life.” But it's difficult not to notice that the CDC report suggests a substantial reknitting of the social fabric,

positioning the rise in suicide less as a distinct disease than as a symptom of deep, widespread ruptures in American life.

Although suicide rates increased in virtually every state from 1999 to 2016, the effects aren't uniformly distributed. The Mountain West stands out for especially dire statistics—much of the region experienced rate increases of 38 to 58 percent. With around 290 deaths annually, Montana has the nation's highest rate of suicide.

Colorado, however, tallies the most yearly suicide deaths in the region, making it an ideal testing ground for a fresh approach to prevention. In 2015 it was selected for a CDC-funded program tasked with creating a comprehensive framework for “upstream” prevention, addressing populations in which “no suicidal thinking or behaviors may be apparent.” The strategy mimics those for heart-attack and

A 2017 study raises the possibility of a Mountain West “culture of suicide.”

cancer prevention, which begin well before the onset of disease. Based in Colorado's Office of Suicide Prevention, the program coordinates players including universities, businesses, courts, mental health organizations and public agencies, and aims to reduce suicide 20 percent statewide by 2024.

It now operates in six pilot counties, with plans to roll out in Colorado's other 58 counties; a statewide model could be exported further afield. It's unclear what that model will be; contributing factors vary considerably more for suicide than for cardiac arrest. But it might include things like community-building 5Ks and park cleanups, affordable-housing advocacy, tracking of indicators including divorce filings and DUIs, and workshops disseminating friendly workplace practices.

Sarah Brummett, director of the OSP, acknowledges that gauging the effects of such a broad initiative will be challenging. Depending on your cast of mind, it may seem quixotic—or grittily ambitious. “A lot of work has to happen before anyone has reached the point of crisis,” Brummett says. “You can't just focus resources on identifying people at risk and getting them to care. There's so much happening at the social and ecological level.”

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In his landmark 1897 study *Suicide*, French sociologist Émile Durkheim famously identifies a species of suicide arising from insufficient social integration—the extent to which individuals coalesce, through mutually reinforcing bonds, into a collaborative society. Inadequate integration, he says, creates excessive individualism and, ultimately, “egoistic suicide.” Durkheim writes, “The more weakened the groups to which [the individual] belongs, the less he depends on them, the more he consequently depends only on himself.” Master of his destiny, he neither relies on his neighbor nor owes that neighbor anything in return. In a society shaped by such thinking, Durkheim continues, “the incidents of private life which seem the direct inspiration of suicide...are in reality only incidental causes. The individual yields to the slightest shock of circumstance because the state of society has made him a ready prey to suicide.”

Excessive individualism is, of course, an American birthright and a mainstay of Western lore. One can see its influence in regional antipathy toward collective enterprises such as taxes and regulation, and it's easy to imagine how it helped the early loggers, cattlemen and miners who staked claims there with scant community to lean on. Currents persist. A pair of modern articles—one from 2002, in *American Sociological Review*; the other from 2013, in *Sociological Perspectives*—confirm previously documented low levels of social integration in the Mountain West. Noting unusually high rates of residential transience and marital instability, the authors identify the region as ripe for the kind of egoistic suicide Durkheim describes. A 2017 study by Carolyn Pepper, of the University of Wyoming, further raises the possibility of a Mountain West “culture of suicide.” This might result, Pepper writes, from “an attitude that suicide is a relatively acceptable response to adversity,” a belief that it is “relatively normal and perhaps inevitable” or

"a belief that suicide is a demonstration of one's independence."

Pepper is now digging more deeply into Western individualism. "When I talk about suicide around Wyoming, people always say to me, 'It's that pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps mentality,'" she says. I've heard this refrain too, from doctors, advocates and friends of suicide victims. "We have some preliminary data where people in the Mountain West describe their own attitudes and their cultural environment as having more of this rugged individualism compared with other parts of the country," Pepper says. Her findings suggest that Westerners are less likely than others to express emotion or to seek help for problems, and more prone to view failure to overcome obstacles without aid as a sign of weakness.

During our conversation, Pepper notes that the current national suicide rate, 13.4 per 100,000 people, is not a historic high: In the early 1930s, during the Depression, 22 out of every 100,000 Americans killed themselves. Tales of post-crash Wall Street jumpers are familiar. Less known is that suicides had risen steadily throughout the ostensibly roaring prosperity of the 1920s. Rates dropped with the New Deal, then plunged during World War II. "Social disturbances and great popular wars rouse collective sentiments," Durkheim writes. "As they force men to close ranks and confront the common danger, the individual thinks less of himself and more of the common cause."

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In 1987 Tony Daranyi married Barclay Smith, an artist and teacher he'd met soon after moving to Telluride. About 10 years later, they both read the cult environmental novel *Ishmael* and were inspired to start an organic farm. They bought land in Norwood, a small rural community about 30 miles from Telluride. At the end of a long driveway off a county road, they built a house of straw bale. They raise poultry, hogs, goats and bees. In the last years of Tom Slocum's life, Daranyi invited him to parties at the farm, but Slocum always declined. I arrive on a bright, warm August evening. Chicken marengo cooks on the stovetop in a stylishly rustic kitchen. Through a window, Daranyi points to an irrigation pond that is perilously low; the region is enduring perhaps its driest summer on record. The pastures are sere and



San Miguel County, home to Telluride, has seen more than its share of suicides.

fawn. Wildfires throughout the West often haze blue skies, making the air pungent with smoke.

Before dinner, we sit down to talk in a sunny office. Against one wall, shelves hold a diverse collection of books, including several on writing. Daranyi has recently been working on an essay, trying to come to terms with events that threaten his native optimism. "This winter was a bust," he says, referring to a season of meager snowfall that bruised local businesses. "The water situation. All summer we've had smoke-filled skies." The Mountain West has always relied on nature—for minerals, timber, lift tickets. Amid the region's vast empty spaces, the vagaries of weather and soil have doubtless helped foster instability. But recent conditions can feel siege-like. "We live politically in a challenging time," Daranyi says. "The current political agenda and what we've been trying to do here are at odds."

"I've had three good friends die this summer," Daranyi says. Two accidents, one suicide. "Life's tough. It didn't used to seem to be."

Back in August 2016, I had talked with Daranyi by phone about Slocum's death. Up to a point, their journeys had been closely entwined. Daranyi wondered aloud about what separates resilience from despair: "To lose a friend to suicide leaves you with a lot of questions and soul searching: What path was he headed on? Am I on that path?" There were differences, of course. Daranyi got married and had children. Winters, he works ski patrol—a fraternity of

conscientious jocks that one member describes to me as providing a kind of therapy. After Slocum's death, Daranyi started listening closely for signs of distress among friends. In addition to being county coroner, Sante, a ski patrol buddy, is chief paramedic for the Telluride fire district; Daranyi does wellness checks for him. For now, even in drought, Daranyi has the farm. I ask if he's given more thought to how his path differs from Slocum's. "I don't have an answer to that question yet," he says.

I meet Laurel Robinson, Daranyi and Slocum's former roommate, at her office above a bookstore in Telluride. In good weather, the town is almost comically picturesque. American flags hang from well-kept brick buildings housing galleries, cafés, restaurants and boutiques. The crowd is lively, tan and fit. The Range Rovers drive slowly, and middle-aged men don pink pants without evident self-consciousness. Real estate has been booming more or less since the mid-1980s, and median home values now approach \$1 million. Tom Cruise, Oprah Winfrey and Ralph Lauren have Telluride estates. But beyond Main Street, the houses—handsome, unpretentious, attended by gardeners—are often deserted, the second, third or fourth homes of owners who mostly live elsewhere. Many year-round residents have been exiled to cheaper towns such as Norwood, sometimes an hour or more away.

In a cluttered office outfitted with a Mac monitor, Robinson, executive director of the



annual Telluride Wine Festival, sifts through the fallout from this year's event. The money isn't adding up, and she's fielding peevish complaints. In an earlier era, she says, Telluride's many festivals—largely musical—were facilitated by a culture of volunteerism. Friends and friends of friends would work for tickets. "Now there's no time," she says. "People have to work so much in order to live here." For unmoneyed newcomers, the barriers to entry are prohibitive. "People with great aspirations come and think, I'm going to do whatever I need to make it work," Daranyi says. "And then they think, Oh my God, this is too difficult. It seems like people are coming and going all the time."

For those who came to Telluride in its undiscovered state, the sense can be of water rising. "That's why I have three jobs," says Emil Sante, who has lived here for decades.

"It weighs on you financially, psychologically." Todd Creel, who had the good sense to go into real estate early on, says of Slocum, "He was very opinionated about politics and ethics, the environment and Telluride as a community." Its transformation grated. "The dynamic changed, and the values changed. That was hard for him. It was hard for a lot of people." When it comes to income disparity, San Miguel is the nation's eighth-most-unequal county, according to a 2018 study by the non-profit Economic Policy Institute. (Wyoming's Teton County and Colorado's Pitkin County rank first and seventh, respectively.) Amid such evolution, friction is inevitable. But unhappiness among the old guard often arises less from class resentment than from the fracture of their community.

After a divorce, Robinson lost her Telluride condo. "I can't buy something else in town," she says between bites of a late lunch of quiche. "I don't have as many friends, and it's harder to get together with them, because I'm in Norwood. Things pass me by." Ski burns and potlucks have died out, vestiges of a once tight-knit colony. I ask Robinson about those days. "What's really weird is I'll have these Tom flashbacks," she says. There was the time she planted a garden. "Tom came out and watched me. He asked all these questions about the flowers, like he'd never been in a yard before. I can see his face so clearly now, whenever I'm planting." Another time, on a rafting trip, she got doused by rapids, and Slocum warmed her on a riverside rock, warding off hypothermia she hadn't even noticed setting in.

Robinson has known several people who

killed themselves in the area, and she wonders about common threads. "I have contemplated suicide a number of times myself," she says. "I look at myself and go, What makes me like Tom?" Stereotypes about suicide victims seldom include athletes and outdoorsmen, but people who have staked their identities and relationships on physicality can be unusually vulnerable to the erosions of age.

"People do stuff together around here: tennis, hiking, biking, skiing," Robinson says. Friendships almost invariably revolve around outdoor activity, and Achilles tendon injuries have lately kept her from participating. "You tend to get separated from your tribe when you can't keep up. And you go, Well, maybe I've got no place in the tribe anymore. It's kind of like in the wild."

Suicidality, which encompasses everything



Laurel Robinson witnessed Telluride evolve into a resort area.

from suicidal ideation to the completed act, is a continuum—a fact often emphasized by prevention advocates. Suicidal thoughts are common, but few people act on them. Of those who do and survive, a majority do not die by suicide, which is to say they resolve to live. Paul Reich, a program manager with Mental Health Colorado and a vocal advocate for affordable housing, tells me, "Any time you're in a community that has housing that's not stable, it creates a high-stress situation." Colorado is substantially populated by people from elsewhere who have left friends and family behind. "More than half of Telluride's workers come from outside the county," Reich says. "You spend your days here, but your nights in, say, Montrose," which is 65 miles away. "You're not really connected to either of them. There's a lack of a

support network, the connections that help people get through difficult times."

Yet local suicide prevention remains largely focused on crisis. When I ask Robinson what she thinks about available mental health resources, she looks exasperated. She does not consider suicide by definition irrational; being assured in a moment of crisis that her life is precious doesn't move her. Like all of us, she wants to sense, from her surroundings, that her existence means something. I ask what she does when she feels down. "I call Tony," she says, chuckling through tears. There's something flintily calming about Daranyi. He has the unhurried manner of a cabinetmaker, and his optimism isn't cloying. He's calling his new essay "The Glass Is Half Full."

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In a note written before his death, Tom Slocum referred to his physical decline. He indicated he would face his end on his own terms. Like most suicide notes, it offered friends and family no closure.

At the suggestion of Slocum's brother Steve, I look up some of Tom's writing in a local paper, where, over the years, he published several letters and op-ed pieces. What comes through is a man troubled by political partisanship and concerned about his community: back-country protocol, gun control, mountain sports safety.

By April 2015, when he published his last item, he'd become reclusive. Friends say that he'd stopped taking care of himself, his hair gone long and greasy, and that he'd become bitter, unresponsive to overtures even from close friends. But the piece—strange and expansive, proceeding to a dreamy, metaphoric, melancholic denouement—has nothing bitter in it. Slocum describes being

on the Colorado, a river he loves, negotiating rapids whose names he knows well. A current of fear, about his own fate and others', ripples the surface; he ponders "an American West where supply of firearms is guaranteed while access to life-giving water seems far less assured." Conditions are beyond his control. He hopes for the best: "The gorge narrows. The current quickens.... I hope for a confluence of currents in calm, pacific waters as I lever oar blades deep into the murk, feel the forces in play, then I brace for cold, harsh spray from the rapids. And I remind all to stay on the high side of the boat, until she slides up the smooth sandy surface of the beach."

For help, contact the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 800-273-8255 or suicidepreventionlifeline.org.