The stranger on the phone wants to kill himself.
He is young, a high schooler. He is attracted to men. His family doesn’t know. Neither do his friends. Carrying his secret is suffocating — maybe it would hurt less if he didn’t breathe at all.

But he had read a story online about a brave young man, Alec Donovan — “Gay New Jersey high school wrestling state champ comes out on college recruiting trip” — who told the world that he knew how it felt to suffocate every day, every minute, and yearned to end that pain. So he ended it — by cutting out. He offered to help others enduring the same torment. So the stranger decided to take his offer.

Alec’s hand trembles as he holds the phone to his ear. He is in gym class when the call arrives on this spring day at Brick Memorial High School, but the period is idle, so Alec dashes off to find the only man around who he trusts can help. Earl Mosely, the school district’s anti-bullying coordinator, pauses to process what the breathless 18-year-old standing in his office is hearing. Mosely wants to know: Is the stranger willing to reach out to someone better equipped to steer him to safety than a panicked high school wrestling state champ? But the voice insists it must be Alec. He has stepped to the same precipice and contemplated what relief might lie in the void below.

So Alec stays on the line. He listens and occasionally places his hand over the phone when he needs to whisper to Mosely. The teacher guides him probe for an address, he says, remind the boy that there is another path. Mosely calls the authorities, relays the location and asks Alec to parrot back words of confidence and assurance. Eventually, the sirens ring in the background. Then, silence.

For five disquieting minutes, just silence. Alec hangs up.

Before Alec Donovan became the NCAA’s first publicly gay wrestler, he had to win a lifelong match with a private pain that other gay athletes understand too well.
A week later, the stranger’s number appears again: “Thank you, Alec.” The other boy is still afraid to do what Alec did. He isn’t ready to tell the world, to feel the lift and finally breathe. But he hopes his fear will soon begin to crum and let the truth slip through. He doesn’t want to end his life anymore because he knows someone cares — someone who was willing to spend those 35 agonizing minutes on the phone until the son came to know relief.

Alec exhales. He understands the boundary separating the two paths is precariously thin. He straddles it for years, even after hearing the stories of athletes and many others who were celebrated for coming out — those who insist that uttering “I’m gay” erased the pain rather than sharpening it.

Despite so much progress, countless young men remain petrified of those two words. It’s why Alec wants to help. It’s why he took that call and stayed on the line.

The first active NCAA wrestler to come out publicly once worried with the fear and uncertainty that, even today, can drive a young athlete to wrap a belt around the pullup bar in his room or to envision a nearby bridge and ponder whether it’s high enough rather than have an honest conversation with a teammate or a coach.

Or, especially, with a father.

After the divorce, the kids are Tom Donovan’s to raise. A 31-year-old single dad, he will come to know strain and sacrifice as he watches over 4-year-old Alec and 1-year-old Harleigh. He will put them first. He will put in extra hours working construction jobs so they won’t go hungry, and so they can attend St. Rose — the good Catholic school nearby. Little Alec will get to wear a uniform — rich or poor, two parents or one, he will be indistinguishable from the others.

So Tom works those extra hours and starts his own contracting company. He cooks for his children and teaches them to do the same. He watches Alec flail at soccer balls, but he’s quicker to berate his son than any of the other boys. Alec finishes 1-15 in his first competitive season. His sole victory is a forfeit.

“Anger issues,” he calls them. “If he won’t, the boy flees next door to find refuge with the babysitter. He seethes. “Anger issues,” he calls them.

Wrestling room can’t cage Tom’s temper. Steal a few extra bites of his love. He doesn’t want his son to hurt himself in the sport rather than devote more time to friends and frivolity leaves the club’s owner, Vincci Santanisello, in awe. As Alec improves, Tom gets tougher. Santanisello watches as the father shouts instructions, corrects form and monitors every meal. But Tom always takes Alec to breakfast after weigh-ins and flashes hand signals from the stands during matches, pointing to his head to remind Alec to be smart, slapping his cheek when he loses focus.

Tom ensures his children say their prayers every night before bed. He takes Alec and his sister to Mass on Sunday mornings before practice, and arranges the Nativity scene under the television as Christmas approaches. Every night, dutifully, Alec prays.

Moments of the 1-15 season fade, replaced by a Middle Atlantic Wrestling Association championship at 128 pounds in eighth grade. Tom races to Lisa and anyone within earshot that his progeny is a stud, that he is charming. — Tom calls him “the mayor” — and that he will have any girl he wants.

In a middle school match, Tom sees Alec’s leg twist and his ankle snap. He sees him try to soldier on for another 20 seconds, then hears his cries of pain and watches him pound the mat, begging for the end.

Finally, Tom ready to pounce, the referee stops the match. Cooks dive to hug Alec’s dad, but Tom berates the referee for not ending the match sooner — for prolonging Alec’s pain.

The fury, as always, is a byproduct of his love. He doesn’t want his son to hurt.

Since he was a boy, wrestling has served as Alec’s outlet.

“’That looks gay.’"

The comment about the trophy Alec places on his desk comes from one of the popular kids, a middle school classmate. They always talk about their basketball games and soccer matches, so why can’t he share the symbol of another tournament victory? Why can’t he be proud? The school doesn’t have a wrestling team, so no one understands what he endured to earn it.

Classmates hear the remark and snicker. The teacher lets the comment pass. Then more words: “Make on male contact — touching each other so sneaky,” the boy says. “It’s wrong.”

Alec’s peers talk about wanting to kiss girls, but he doesn’t feel the same urges. As hormones expose desires and differences, friends start distancing themselves. Alec says hello in the hallways, but he feels them staring through him. He hangs on the periphery of conversations, but he finds invisibility. After the comment in class, he turns to Google for answers about what “gay” means. He reads and understands. “Oh, that might be me,” he thinks. “But it’s not wrestling.”

Days spent learning from the Bible at St. Rose compound the confusion.

“I was hoping for reincarnation as someone I could actually be. … I didn’t want to do the suicide, but to me there was no way out if the only person you really care about, the one that you look up to for guidance, is telling you people are going to hurt you.”

ALEC DONOVAN, ON HOW HE FELT AFTER HE CAME OUT TO HIS FATHER.

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whispers that the new kid on the wrestling team might be gay. He’s not. His parents don’t think he is. But he is.

The new kid determines his match with a loud thud. His opponent is much more experienced. He’s bigger, stronger, faster. He’s not expecting to lose, but he’s not expecting to win, either. The new kid laughs, and he only wants to learn. He’s never wrestled before, but he’s never been afraid to try. He’s not afraid to fail. He’s not afraid to win. He’s not afraid of anything.

The new kid’s father watches him wrestle. He’s proud of his son. He’s proud of how far he’s come. He’s proud of how far he has to go.

The new kid’s father tells him that he’s good. That he’s talented. That he’s got potential. That he’s got promise. That he’s got a future.

The new kid smiles. He knows that he’s got a future. He knows that he’s got a place in the world. He knows that he’s got a purpose.

He knows that he’s got a story to tell.

**There’s been tears in my sleep. I’m caught downstair****

LISA MARTINZ

**Winter 2017**
The bad news is offset with a dose of good. Alec has been in touch with John Garriques, the coach at Centenary University, a Division III school only a two-hour drive north. One of Alec’s closest childhood friends, Zac Hunter, is an assistant coach there. Alec says he misses the leaves changing color in the fall and the crispness in the air, so Tom helps get his transfer papers in order. He cobbles together grant money and saves another $13,000 by arranging for Alec to live 20 minutes from campus with his grandmother and aunt.

With his son’s love for the sport waning after his experience at Cal Poly, Tom’s only stipulation for the transfer is that Alec must keep wrestling. His son may be renounced as a pioneer, but Tom knows him, above all, as a wrestler. He watches Alec’s state championship match when he needs to remember. Alec agrees. Tom sexts his son’s passion for the sport reignite while instructing the youth wrestlers at Shore Thing. Outside, the rust on the car is more wary of separating off with him. The cheap shots and brutality of the past departed along with his secret.

Tom even welcomes another boy into his home — Alec’s boyfriend, in from out of town, becomes another member of the family. Tom takes them hiking in the Catskills. And when Alec asks if he can attend a gay pride event in Chicago, Tom blanches — not because of the event, he insists, but because of the location. The city’s murder rate frightens him. So he finds another route. Why not go to one in New York? He advises Alec on the easiest way to get there and shows him where to park. He tells him to have a good time, but to be safe. “Like any other parent thing,” Tom says.

As Alec starts his time at Centenary, father and son attend Roberta’s wedding. Alec, who dabbles in photography, agrees to shoot the ceremony. He and Tom listen to the two men exchange vows on a fall afternoon, pledging to love each other for the rest of their lives. Through it all, Tom beams. When he can, Alec pulls his eye away from the lens and watches his father smile.

At Centenary, Alec and his new teammates grapple through two-hour practices that demand contact and intimate proximity six days a week. Forbids press against forbides. Legs wrap around arms. The men carry one another on their backs or hold each other in their arms while running laps. That looks gay.

The Centenary wrestlers understand those words from Alec’s past are misguided. None are uncertain by entrusting their bodies with a gay man’s because colored bruising defines the wrestling room – each large, graphed, twist of a limb or forearm pressing a face into the mat is not easily mistaken for anything else. They endure that torture together, as equals. Team captain Josh Sibblies has spoken with his teammates: Not one of the 20 others pushes back or expresses discomfort. Gay or straight, they eagerly sweat and bleed with Alec. They drench their clothes, some up to their necks, as the water fountain and shake his hand after trying to mangle him.

Garriques forecasts multiple All-America honors in Alec’s future and perhaps a national championship. More important, though, is the anti-bullying club the coach starts on campus because Alec started one at Cal Poly. The two work together to design its mission and recruit members. Soon, wrestlers and distance runners interpolate.

Alec addresses the room. 30 strong, at the club’s first meeting in September. He details the confusion he felt. The depression. The comments in school hallways. The suicide attempts. The power words can have over a fragile young psyche. Some students stand up, one by one, and share their own stories. Others quietly relate. Garriques led a speech impediment that elicited mockery as a child. Sibblies’ high school teammates seemed too eager to chide him because he is black. Chris Muce, only 5 feet 5 inches, long endured short jokes and jokes about his malformed ears — their bulging cartilage battered and reshaped by years of wrestling. Alec’s ears look similar.

More than a dozen attendees approach him after the presentation. He is brave, they say. They are proud to know him.

Alec decides to major in secondary education. After a fulfilling summer working with children at Shore Thing, he hopes to become a teacher and a coach. Perhaps he will start a college wrestling program for women. He wants them to have the same opportunities that were afforded a gay boy from New Jersey. “They have no one to look up to,” he says.

He wants a son one day. Carried by a surrogate. Alec hopes the boy will follow him into wrestling, but he will let him try any sport or hobby he desires. No matter what he chooses, Alec hopes to cheer for him like his father did. That, at least, he will emulate.

Alec walks to his car on a fall day after practice, drenched in sweat, hair tousled and face red from two more hours in Centenary’s wrestling room. As he does these walks, he calls Tom. They discuss the nutrition plan that the father has carefully laid out for his son. They talk about work and class and grades and grap- pling, the traumas of the past long since scoured over by the minutiae of the present.

Alec glances at the ridge to the west that looms over campus. He ad- mires the mix of hues — black, orange, yellow, red — as the last bits of evening sunlight dance on the leaves. Tom rambles, and Alec stops to soak in the sight. The distinct colors complement each other, he thinks. Those differences make each tree appear more vibrant than if it stood alone, isolated from the others, shivering in the wind. Tom rambles, and Alec stops to soak in the sight. The distinct colors complement each other, he thinks. Those differences make each tree appear more vibrant than if it stood alone, isolated from the others, shivering in the wind. Tom rambles, and Alec stops to soak in the sight. The distinct colors complement each other, he thinks. Those differences make each tree appear more vibrant than if it stood alone, isolated from the others, shivering in the wind.