

Giving hope to new moms

» Within 24 hours after Mary Ellen Moffitt took the life of her newborn daughter and then killed herself, family members vowed they would work to educate others about the risks and symptoms of postpartum depression and psychosis.

Pamela Moffitt, 43, of St. Clair Shores was Mary Ellen's sister-in-law. Pamela helped start the Tree of Hope Foundation, a non-profit that provides education about postpartum mood disorders and support groups with licensed professionals. This is Pamela's story.

The entire week after Mary Ellen's death, this house was home base for the family. It wasn't more than 24 hours after she died that we were standing in the driveway and said we had to do something so this wouldn't happen to anybody else.

I explained to my children that Aunt Mary Ellen was sick. Just like a person can have heart failure, or kidney failure, or liver failure, your mind can fail you, too. And that's what happened. Her mind failed her.

I talk to community groups about awareness of postpartum depression to let them know Tree of Hope and support groups exist for them. I tell people that Tree of Hope was born of tragedy.

In July 2004, my sister-in-law ended her life and the life of her 5-week-old daughter. People know that women have issues with mood disorders after pregnancy. But nobody thinks it could happen to her family. When we talk to health care professionals, we bring in Nancy Roberts, a registered nurse whose sister killed herself because of postpartum depression.

Here we are — both having suffered a similar loss, and we didn't have to leave the state to find each other. Then people understand this happens more often than we like to realize.

Sometimes when we talk to community groups, I see older women in the audience. They may be there because they are concerned about a daughter or a granddaughter, but some are trying to figure out why they felt so bad once many years ago after the birth of a child.

Because of my last name, in the weeks and months after Mary Ellen's death, I would be writing a check or using a credit card, and people would ask me if I was related to her. I



KIMBERLY P. MITCHELL

Charity event

The Tree of Hope Foundation is sponsoring a 5K charity event. Last year's event raised \$23,000 for support groups and education programs about postpartum mood disorders.

The fourth annual Step Up for Hope 5K Run, Walk & Stroll will be June 21 at Metro Beach Metropark, along Jefferson in Harrison Township.

Advance registration is \$15 at www.treeofhopefoundation.org. Onsite registration is available for \$20, beginning at 8:15 a.m.

Pamela Moffitt, center, 43, of St. Clair Shores started the Tree of Hope Foundation to help moms. Her sister-in-law had postpartum psychosis. Pamela is shown with her husband, Mark Moffitt, 40, and their kids, Joseph Moffitt, 14; Sandra Moffitt, 12, and Sophie Moffitt, 7.

heard so many stories from women, women who had suffered 40, 50 years ago and never said anything to anyone. How they cried every day for months, how they felt so awful. One woman told me she was afraid of herself every day.

Women wear their labor stories like a badge of honor. How long we pushed. How long it took. How the baby twisted. But if postpartum depression happens to you, you say nothing. It's such an isolating condition.

The most important thing we can do is make it something we can talk about. If you struggled with your children, make sure you discuss it with your girls before they start having babies. How I wish we could have stopped the suffering without this end for Mary Ellen and her baby. And you wish you had known more than you did.

One of our accomplishments is that we've

grown from one support group to five in the past year. They're free, and there are five a week. You don't have to have a clinical diagnosis or a doctor's referral.

My goal was not to have women wait a month to go to a meeting. If somebody calls me on a Friday, she can go to a meeting on Monday, with a licensed health care professional. We've had women come to a support group meeting, and agree to go to the emergency room and they've been admitted for treatment.

We said if we could just save one person, it would be worth it. Based on what's happened at our support group meetings, I believe we have.

Pamela's story was told to Patricia, a Twist writer. Reach Patty at 313.223.4538 or pmontemurri@freepress.com.

FOR A SCHEDULE OF TREE OF HOPE MEETINGS, GO TO www.twistdetroit.com