

Essay
**Forgotten founder: Harry Marsh Warren
and the history and legacy of the Save-A-Life League**

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Abstract: Now a largely forgotten figure, Harry Marsh Warren founded the first suicide prevention organization in the United States and perhaps the world. He created, organized, and led what came to be known as the Save-A-Life League for 34 years – from 1906 until his death in 1940. During much of the first half of the twentieth century, the Save-A-Life League was the only suicide prevention organization in the U.S. It paved the way for later organized suicide prevention efforts, such as the Samaritans and other crisis-oriented services. The history and legacy of Warren and the Save-A-Life League is reviewed.

Keywords: Harry Marsh Warren, Save-A-Life League, suicide prevention

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In recently published accounts of historical milestones in suicide prevention in the United States (Reed & Silverman, 2009; Spencer-Thomas & Jahn, 2012) several prominent figures were identified, including Louis Dublin (Dublin, 1963; Dublin & Bunze), Edwin S. Shneidman (Shneidman, 1993, 2001; Shneidman & Farberow, 1957a, b), Norman Farberow (Farberow & Shneidman, 1961), and Thomas Joiner (Joiner, 2005). Moreover, several “impactful events” in the history of the suicide prevention were noted, beginning with the opening of the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Center in 1958 (Reed & Silverman, 2009; Spencer-Thomas & Jahn, 2012). Conspicuously absent from these historical reviews was the name of Harry Marsh Warren, who in 1906 founded the first organized effort at suicide prevention in the U.S.

(Colt, 2006) and perhaps the world. Now a largely forgotten figure, the purpose of this article is to provide a brief history of Warren and the Save-A-Life League.

Harry Marsh Warren was born on April 19, 1861 in Hudson, New Hampshire – exactly one week after the start of the American Civil War. After spending his childhood and adolescence in various small towns in New Hampshire, he attended the Union Theological Seminary in New York City and was ordained a Baptist minister in 1891. In 1893 he met and married Adelaide Everett Butler, and together they had three children – a daughter (Beatrice) and two sons (Harry M. and Harry R.). After briefly serving as pastor of the Nepperhan Avenue Church in Yonkers, New York, in 1895 Warren became pastor of the Central Park Church on East 83rd Street in New York City. He continued serving as a pastor there during the next several years, and also held regular church services in hotel lobbies around the city in what he called the Parish of All Strangers.

According to Colt (2006), one evening in 1906 a twenty-year-old woman staying at a Broadway

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hotel called the manager and asked to speak to a minister. The manager attempted to contact Warren that night, but was unable to do so. The next morning a maid found the woman unconscious near an empty bottle that contained poisonous elements. The woman was rushed to Bellevue Hospital, where Warren visited her at her bedside. The woman informed Warren that she was from the west coast, had been jilted by her boyfriend, and had come to New York (where no one knew her) to kill herself. This incident, along with an earlier one in which Warren became aware of a young man's death by suicide after some ministers apparently refused him aid, galvanized him into action. Shortly thereafter, Warren said in front of his congregation in the Parish of All Strangers that "I wish that all who believe death is the only solution for their problems would give me the chance to prove them wrong" (Barlow, 1933, p. 20).

He also placed an ad in a New York newspaper urging anyone considering suicide to contact him (Colt, 2006). Shortly thereafter, 11 or 12 people (some newspaper accounts posit 11, others 12) who were contemplating suicide came to see him, marking the unofficial beginning of the first organized suicide prevention effort in U.S. history. Warren listened to their problems and provided compassionate support, and none of the individuals died by suicide. Word of mouth spread and newspaper stories about Warren and his work began being circulated, and soon about 8 people a day were arriving at his office, where they were treated with sympathy and understanding by Warren or one of several volunteers (Colt, 2006). By 1940, Warren reported that the Save-A-Life League provided services for an average of 100 people per week (Kerlin, 1940).

After becoming financially independent through inheritance and donations to the League, Warren retired from the ministry to devote all his efforts to suicide prevention. In addition to counseling suicidal individuals, the League provided a variety of other services, including free beds at certain hospitals, free legal services, and temporary free board and lodging for those in need (Barlow, 1933). Warren and his volunteers also assisted survivors by sending children of parents who had died by suicide to summer camps and providing Christmas baskets to families bereaved by suicide. Throughout its existence the Save-A-Life League operated entirely through voluntary contributions and received no federal or state aid (Barlow, 1933).

Warren was highly proactive in his suicide prevention efforts; he did not wait for potentially suicidal people to come to him. Instead, he scanned

local newspapers for stories about suicide and suicide attempts and made arrangements with churches, courts, hospitals, medical examiners, and the police to interview people known to have attempted suicide (Colt, 2006; Melick, 1940). After these individuals were identified, Warren or one of his volunteers would visit them and provide compassion, support, and material items if they were needed. Individuals who were identified as being potentially suicidal but who lived outside of the New York City metropolitan area were sent letters advising against suicide and referring them to a League volunteer in closer proximity (Colt, 2006). In addition to their central office in New York, the Save-A-Life League eventually had branches in Chicago, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Boston, Miami, London, and Paris (Heffernan, 1933).

Around 1916 Warren officially named the organization the Save-A-Life League, the headquarters of which was located at 108 West 77th Street in New York. He described the organization in a New York Times article from August 8, 1921: "The Save-A-Life League has received thousands of letters from different parts of the world telling of sorrows beyond human endurance, and begging for all possible help. Quantities of inspirational literature, which the league publishes, have been sent out. At the headquarters hundreds and thousands have come either for personal help or in behalf of others." As word about the league increased, greater numbers of individuals received services from it. In 1932, for example, League volunteers interviewed 2,816 suicidal people or their friends, visited 1,084 families in which suicides had occurred, and 2,168 homes where suicide had been attempted (Colt, 2006). In addition to founding the first suicide prevention organization in the United States, Warren provided other services for people in need and was a noted defender of the marginalized. For example, he organized and ran the Khaki and Blue Home Club, which provided a variety of services to army and navy servicemen from World War I. In 1925 he led a campaign to reprieve a death row inmate who Warren believed was wrongly convicted, and in 1932 he refused to press charges against a boy who stole his son's car, because Warren was convinced that the boy had a mental health problem and would be better served by treatment than by extended incarceration. Warren's inclination to view behaviors others would perceive as "criminal" – including suicide – as reflecting underlying mental health problems was unusual for the period and clearly ahead of his time.

Warren also correctly surmised the connection between economic conditions and suicide rates (Stack, 2000; Yin & Chang, 2009), as well as the

fact that cognitive distortions may lead to suicidal behavior (Beck, Kovacs, & Weissman, 1975; Joiner, 2005; Shneidman, 1996). For example, in 1934 he noted that “the underlying cause of self-destruction is an inability to cope with disappointing circumstances. The remedy lies in changing the turbulent thought to rational thinking and a true sense of values and then meet the immediate need responsible for this mental conflict” (Carroll, 1934). Moreover, Warren was aware that suicides peaked in the springtime and were least likely to occur in the month of December (Melick, 1940).

Warren continued to lead the Save-A-Life League (which was sometimes referred to as the National Save-A-Life League) during much of the first half of the twentieth century, and for many years it was the only organized suicide prevention group in the U.S. (Colt, 2006). Other organized efforts to assist suicidal individuals were made, but most disappeared quickly. Gaining the necessary support for such organizations proved difficult, largely due to the fact that suicide and the victims of it had been stigmatized for centuries (Minois, 1999) and suicidal individuals were widely viewed with disdain rather than compassion (Joiner, 2005, 2010). In fact, prior to the 1950s suicide was largely untreated and rarely discussed in the U.S., even in psychological and psychiatric circles (Colt, 2006; Spencer-Thomas & Jahn, 2012). Over time, however, Warren and the Save-A-Life League paved the way for other organized suicide prevention efforts, such as the Samaritans (Varah, 1985) and other crisis hotline services (Gould & Kalafat, 2009). It was not until Edwin S. Shneidman and Norman Farberow began publishing scientific research on suicide (Shneidman & Farberow, 1957a, b) and Shneidman, Farberow, and Robert Litman established the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Center in 1958 (Spencer-Thomas & Jahn, 2012) that serious attention began to be given to suicide and its prevention. Although Shneidman, in particular, is often legitimately considered to be a “father” of suicide prevention in the U.S. (Leenaars, 2010), a case could be made that Harry Marsh Warren is equally deserving of that title. Unfortunately, unlike Shneidman, who published widely during his lifetime and of whom much is known, little information about Warren and the Save-A-Life League survives.

Harry Marsh Warren was president of the Save-A-Life League for 34 years, from its inception in 1906 until his death on December 21, 1940 in Chappaqua, New York. He was buried at Oakwood Cemetery in Troy, New York. After his father’s death, Harry M. Warren, Jr. continued his father’s work as League president until the organization eventually disbanded. Although it is impossible to know

precisely how many suicides the Save-A-Life League may have prevented, Warren estimated it to be about 1000 per year (Colt, 2006). Although Warren and the Save-A-Life League are gone, their legacy lives on in the history of organized suicide prevention.

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