**AWARENESS SPEECH**

**FOR**

**JAIME FERGUSON**

A very wise young woman named Malala said,”When the whole world is silent, even one voice becomes powerful.” Hello everyone, I’m Jaime Ferguson and I stand before you today, as an AFSP volunteer, and a source of support, a voice to help amplify and understand your own struggles, or that of a family member or someone in need, and a cheerleader to encourage you.  I am here, speaking with you, as a product... a “casualty” of a suicide. The death of my father at an impossibly young age would prove to be the first chapter in my own struggles. It would shape my future and the woman I have become.

I was in the 7th grade... Daddy’s little girl, when, a few short weeks after my birthday, I heard over a police scanner that my father had attempted suicide. Days later, it was more than an attempt... he succumbed to his compulsion... and our lives would never be the same.  I was the youngest of three children, we were all lost.... struggling to deal with this impossible tragedy. We were even more devastated to realize our mother, who felt she could not cope, had nowhere to turn, and literally gave up.  She gave up on herself, her children, her ability to function, and her maternal duty. Most of our neighbors in our small town would have no idea what was actually happening behind closed doors... we were living in our own Hell. If anyone ever says that suicide kills more than once, believe them. I had an incredible, close bond with my father... As a result, I suffered the greatest consequences.  In 8th grade, I began hanging out with an adult crowd, acquaintances of my sister, and was quickly introduced to drugs and alcohol.  I found her encouragement of sexual activity with grown men to be a way to fit in and feel accepted. It wasn’t long before I became homeless ... no support or guidance and nowhere to turn. I traveled aimlessly between Portland and Lane County, trying to figure out how to survive, and how I, still a child, could raise myself. With my drug use increasing, my inexperience and lack of a sense of security, and practically no coping skills, I fought to survive. I lashed out, causing harm and injury to several people.  After multiple arrests, I wound up trapped in the court system. My mother, again, turned her back on me.  It was six months before Measure 11’s mandatory sentencing that I would have faced.  Instead, I was confronted by my school administration. In my junior year of high school, I was informed that I would no longer have the opportunity to graduate. I had failed to achieve the credits needed and they did not feel i had the ability to recover my standing in school.  I was lost. I was painfully aware that a decision had to be made. Would I continue along the path that was laid for me?  Would I become the person that my mother said I would be…A nothing, a failure, a low life?  I once heard an expression... “we either make ourselves miserable or we make ourselves strong. The amount of work is the same.” I was sick of being miserable. I needed a hand... someone to pull me out of the mess. Fortunately, and by the grace of fate and circumstance, I was able to stay with a friend and her family, as I worked to get off drugs and reclaim my life. With the assistance and generosity of community members, I met the requirements set for me by my Probation Officer, and with the support of one special math teacher, I was encouraged to realize that I was worth something... even when most thought I wasn’t. With hard work and determination, I excelled and surprised everyone... most of all, myself. I not only graduated with my class, I received numerous academic scholarships that allowed me to continue my studies.  In my freshman year of college, I was enrolled in a night class for Criminal Justice.  You can imagine the **shock** when I walked into class and saw that my professor was...**my probation officer**!! He later went on to become a Deputy District Attorney.  At the end of first week, as we finished up class, I heard, “Ms. Hammond (**is your last name** **Hammond or Ferguson?**), can you please stay behind?” We’re all familiar with that sinking feeling in the pit of our stomach... well, there it was!! I had no clue what to think. Let’s be honest, our time together wasn’t always pleasant, but this encounter proved to be different. He knew exactly who I was, and he was truly sincere in expressing how proud he was of me.  It was then that I realized, I knew **I did it**. I was inspired, I felt optimistic, I knew I was paving a path for me to become **more**. It was life changing to get that acknowledgement... to recognize my own potential and to find strength in knowing I was so much more than my circumstances.

Years later, I started working in the prison system, got involved with community partners, and never forgot that we all deserve a second chance.  I am living proof that where there’s life, there’s hope.  I have no other family but my two children, and today, I can honestly say that I am a proud, successful, single parent who is fearless in the pursuit of fulfillment, truth, and support for each and every one of you. Without a doubt, I know my father would be proud of me.

May our struggles be only a chapter of the great story we live. We have the ability to be our own heroes.  Let’s continue the fight to live in a world in which suicide is eliminated.   I stand beside you and thank each and every one of you for your strength and courage May my story inspire you to **be** more, **feel** more, and **find** more **inner strength**, and may we all continue to believe in good.  Remember, “When it is darkest, we have the ability to see the stars.” Thank you!