

# **Foreword**

*Donna Holland Barnes, PhD*

Dr. Alton Kirk's *Black Suicide: The Tragic Reality of America's Deadliest Secret* should be read by anyone even distantly interested in suicide among the black population. This book is long past due only because it is a capsule of education on suicide—like a pill—you read and feel much better about understanding suicide in the African-American communities. Few people understand this topic better than Dr. Kirk. He is well aware of the history, the present issues, and what lies ahead for us in this field of suicidology.

Dr. Kirk has been highly published on the topic since the seventies—before the rates of suicide among African-American males became a public issue and declared a public health problem. In 1975, he presented a paper at the American Association of Suicidology “Black Suicide: Area of Neglect by Social Scientist.” In the presentation, he outlined the lack of research in this arena, the lack of concern and the lack of emphasis by major researchers in the field of suicidology. In fact, the majority of his presentations at major conferences were on the issue of black suicide right up to the present day. He never lost interest in the subject and kept up with everything written on the topic.

In 1977, Dr. Kirk was one of the first to frame the argument that stress in black males is a correlation to suicidal behavior, attempts and completions. He argued that many social, physical, political, economical and psychological forces in the system contribute to stress among black males. These systemic forces are much more prevalent in black communities.

Dr. Kirk joined organizations that were springing up in the mid nineties and attended the meetings—specifically Suicide Prevention Action Group (formerly known as Suicide Prevention Advocacy Group) founded by Jerry and Elsie Weyrauch in Atlanta, Georgia after the lost of their daughter to suicide. SPAN was one of the first, if not the first, organizations founded by survivors of suicide where suicide prevention was its primary focus and who made quite an impact on the suicide prevention movement as we know it today. During a SPAN meeting led by the Weyrauchs and attended mostly by white families who have lost someone to suicide, Dr. Kirk stood up and asked, “Where are the black families?” and “Have you reached out to them?” At that time in 1997, Dr. Kirk knew the rates of suicide among African Americans had increased substantially as mentioned in Chapter 2. And if the rates increased, why then, was everyone in the room white? What is wrong with this picture? he said to himself.

About a year later, he attended another national meeting with SPAN. Doris Smith from Atlanta and I—who both lost sons to suicide—were the only two blacks in the room (we thought). We were sitting up front as the meeting came to a close. I turned around and noticed a black man in the back

standing up against the wall. I turned and said, “Doris, there is another black in the room... there’s a black man back there!!!” After the meeting, Doris and I could not wait to meet him and introduce ourselves so that we could have a good discussion about suicide among African Americans and the lack of support from other blacks to get involved with suicide prevention and intervention.

Around the same time, the organization of NOPCAS was beginning to form. Dr. Kirk was the very first one we asked to join our board. He has been with us since 1999 and certainly a strong force for NOPCAS. Our board is now made up of 18 members nationally with a scientific advisory board that is also national. I didn’t know how we could organize a national organization whose primary focus is suicide prevention and intervention among people of color and *not* have Dr.Kirk onboard.

Because of his strong force and determination to bring attention to suicide among blacks, he was actually a lone star when it came to evaluating what was written about suicide among African Americans. In the beginning years of the 70s—not much was written. Kirk had something to say about all that which was written. He would read it, review it, publish his review, and keep moving. Some of his reviews were highly critical because the research that was claimed to be conducted was done loosely or not scientific enough. He got into heated discussions with white researchers who claimed to know what they were talking about while attending national meetings. Dr. Kirk was being a rebel and took this position: if you are going to tell the story, tell it right!

*Black Suicide: The Tragic Reality of America's Deadliest Secret* by Dr. Alton Kirk tells the story with more reliability. This book is not based on assumptions. It is based on history, his own research and true testaments from those who have lost someone to suicide. It's the stories at the end of the book that drive it to the home plate. It brings all the statistics and the theories to life.

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