

Ben West

At the age of 18, Ben West discovered his brother in his bedroom and as first on the scene, gave him CPR as he waited for the emergency services to arrive. Ben has used his personal experience of mental ill health to raise awareness and has taken his story to No.10.

Their story

Losing someone you love is heartbreaking and can affect all areas of your life, both personally and professionally. To go through such deep personal loss and create something positive from it, which will help others affected by mental ill health, takes real courage. That's exactly what Ben has done. This amazing 18 year old organised a 200km walk across Kent while studying for his A'Levels to raise awareness of mental ill health. He did all this while grieving for his 15 year old brother Sam who took his life in 2018. As you would expect, this tragic event crushed Sam's family and friends. None more so than big brother Ben. No one can imagine the impact something like that has, unless you've experienced it yourself. Ben, his family and friends want to help prevent anyone from having to go through that experience. He knows it will take some time, but together with Mum Michelle, Dad Chris and brother Tom, they're determined to use their experience to make a difference. Project #Walktotalk all started on a train journey when Ben had his very own light bulb moment. Grabbing his phone he quickly set about rallying the troops – 'how about raising awareness by walking across Kent?' Eleven close friends quickly

jumped on board and the 200km walk across Kent was created. Ben admits it wasn't easy. "Organising the event wasn't straight forward. I'd been involved in charity events before but never organised anything!" Thankfully he wasn't alone and friends and family started to throw in ideas which saw the project grow to more than 450 people taking part in stages of the walk across ten days. Studying and organising the event whilst still grieving for his brother was tough. With everything going on, it was hard to ignore that it had the potential to take its toll. "Revising was difficult, it was hard to focus and naturally affected how well I could revise. However I soon found that organising the walk helped me to clear my mind and focus better. It gave me a little bit of an escape. From the beginning I knew that the walk was something positive I could do to focus my attention. It kept me in a much better place." The project soon became so big that more and more of his friends pitched in. "None of us had any experience doing this sort of thing, it's been a complete step in the dark for all of us, but we'll take all that experience and put it to making an even better event next year." The walk ended in London outside the Houses of Parliament and the team have been praised by celebrities, MPs and the Prime Minister at the time, Theresa May. "Receiving that letter from Theresa May meant so much, it was the recognition that we're really starting to make a difference. All the messages of support have shown us that we've found something here, it's really helping people and we have to keep it going." With the 2018 walk completed, there's no sign that team West will be stopping anytime soon. Mum Michelle is giving speeches at conferences to encourage teachers to take part in Mental Health First Aider training and the team have raised over £15,000, from the #Walktotalk event, to help develop more mental

health awareness projects. In 2019, they carried out more Kent based events but Ben is looking to encourage others to plan their own. “We’re putting together plans to help people run their own events under the #Walktotalk banner. We’ve had so many positive messages and comments about the project, it’s important to us to expand on what we’ve already achieved. We’ve learned from what we’ve done so far and now others can take that and build on it themselves. Together we’ll keep learning, keep raising awareness.”

Ben is now attending the University of Liverpool while studying Aerospace Engineering and is looking to organise events local to him. “Jonny Benjamin, MBE, a mental health campaigner, put me in touch with some mental health champions in Liverpool. I’m meeting with them so we can bounce ideas of each other to see how we can work together, including an awareness event. I’m also in touch with the University leadership to find out more about a project they are doing to increase the awareness of student support.”

Knowing full well that education is the key to arming people with advice on mental ill health prevention and messages of where to get help, team West are currently encouraging everyone to sign a ‘Save Our Students’ petition calling for mental health first aid training to become compulsory for teachers. “The Department for Education is encouraging schools to have mental health first aiders but unfortunately many schools are happy with just one but it’s not enough for the amount of students they have. We must not stop until every teacher has the training. You don’t need the school to put you forward and many charities are subsidising costs. Anyone can take part and it all goes

towards making sure someone is there for those in need.” With more than 178,000 signatures, there’s still room for more. www.samwestfoundation.org

Above and beyond

Ben is a true inspiration. Not only has he taken a tragedy and turned it into an opportunity but he has continued his studies and works hard on his own personal life too. His dedication is outstanding.

What do others say about them?

Twitter:

@Dailybugle1898

11 October 2019

Despite his grief over his brother’s suicide, Ben West launched a campaign to make mental health awareness mandatory in teacher training. Boris Johnson invited him to Downing Street to present his petition. Let’s hope that vision becomes a Conservative Education Policy.

ITV News Meridian

@itvmeridian

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Oct 5, 2019

Our @PrideOfBritain winners: east and west of the region. Ben West from Frittenden, Kent, raised awareness about mental health after his teenage brother took his own life.

Ann Booth-Clibborn

@the_storycoach

Sep 5, 2018

Respect to the incredible Ben West and his #walktotalk team arriving at Westminster at 4.30 after a 10 day walk from Cranbrook School, Kent to raise awareness of mental health after the death of Sam his 15 yr old brother. It's OK to be not OK

@team_walk2talk

Channel 5 News

@5_News

Oct 23, 2019

This student is calling for compulsory mental health training for teachers after he lost his younger brother, Sam, to suicide.

Ben West is determined to save others from the same pain by campaigning for mental health awareness.

News UK

@NewsUK

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Oct 17, 2019

The Sun Who Cares Wins Mental Health Hero, Ben West, writes for @TheSun today on why we must teach schools to be happy places. Read here:

<https://bit.ly/2Bwozel> #WhoCaresWins19

Liverpool Guild Student Media

@lgstudentmedia

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Nov 20, 2019

‘Liverpool Guild Student Media has recently interviewed Ben West, in which his campaign about raising awareness for mental health issues amongst teenagers was discussed.’

Thank you for the interview @iambenwest!

NHS England Media

@NHSEnglandMedia

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Oct 8, 2019

Ben West wins @TheSun's #WhoCaresWins19 Mental Health Hero Award!
Read Ben's story of his passion and determination around mental health for his late brother, Sam. @katesilverton and @MattHancock present him with his award:

<https://thesun.co.uk/fabulous/10088140/who-cares-wins-awards-2019-nominees/> #NHSHeroes

Emma Mulqueeny OBE

@hubmum

Aug 28, 2018

Am taking part in #projectwalktotalk with our #boysgetsadtoo tee shirts. We are doing this in support of Ben West and his walk for teenage mental health in memory of his brother Sam. <https://projectwalktotalk.com> and Boys Get Sad Too here <https://boysgetsadtoo.bigcartel.com>