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Inlander Reporter Leah Sotti to Receive 2012 Mental Health Reporting Award

The Pacific Northwest Inlander staff reporter Leah Sotti will receive the Washington State 2011-2012 Mental Health Reporting Award for “The People Left Behind,” an in-depth exploration of a 13-year-old’s death by suicide and the broader issues of mental health and suicide prevention in Spokane and the Inland Empire. The award will be presented at the 2012 Washington Behavioral Health Care Conference on Friday, June 22, in Yakima, Wash.

Sotti’s feature article ran March 18, 2012. It tells the story of young Casey Holliday’s life and death, and the need for a community conversation about suicide and prevention. A statewide contingent of people with lived experience of mental illnesses, providers, state employees, researchers and journalism professors chose the winner from three finalists in an online poll. The story was praised for its careful and sensitive handling of Casey’s story and insights about suicide prevention “that go well beyond reporting facts and figures.”

Gratified to learn how much the story meant to people throughout the community, Sotti said this story changed her in deep, personal ways. “When I heard about Casey’s story, I was forever impacted. I wondered what could push a 13-year-old girl to suicide. And when I started trying to answer that question, what unfolded before me was this complex social stigma about suicide and mental health, and how this problem — the one no one wants to talk about — was getting bigger and bigger. I knew that if people could see the high suicide numbers I was seeing, and could hear the pain that the Holliday family had endured since the loss of Casey, that perhaps something could change.

“Maybe we could get people to start talking — to our children, our friends, our neighbors, our co-workers — about suicide. And maybe if we did, we could help people like Casey. For her sake, I just wish it’s something we could have done sooner.”
Three judges chose the finalists from a strong field of stories produced at news organizations across Washington State. The judges were: Cindy Adams, Customer Services Coordinator with Greater Columbia Behavioral Health in Kennewick; Prof. Roger Simpson, who teaches journalism and ethics at the University of Washington, and Ann Christian, C.E.O. of the Washington Community Mental Health Council, which co-sponsors the award along with the Washington State Coalition to Improve Mental Health Reporting.

Runners-up for this year’s reporting prize were K.C. Mehaffey, for a series of Wenatchee World articles on suicide culminating in “Three Mothers Share Their Grief” on April 22, 2012, and Lauren Kronebusch for two articles on depression (“Continuing to Cope” and “Self-Help Through Depression”) in the Feb. 28-29, 2012 issues of The Daily UW.

The Washington State Coalition to Improve Mental Health Reporting seeks to support journalists’ efforts to report fairly and accurately on mental illness by providing reporting guidelines, sources and factual information. The goal of the annual contest is to reward journalism that improves the public’s understanding of mental illnesses and reflects accurate, in-depth and even-handed reporting. The honor includes a $500 cash award.

For more information about the coalition and links to all three finalists, go to [www.mentalhealthreporting.org](http://www.mentalhealthreporting.org).

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