suicide watch

by Philip Dawdy

photographs by

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For the increasing number of people who work underneath and near the Aurora Bridge, "jumpers" are a grisly, disturbing—and increasingly dangerous—reality. But the solution to stemming the tide of those intent on ending their lives is coming slowly

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Maren DeVries was a 15-year-old sophomore at Ballard High School who played recreation league soccer. She liked to change her hair color, showing up for practice one week with pink hair and the next with purple.

Late in the morning of May 6, 2006, she drove a car to the Aurora Bridge—a long span that reaches over the Lake Washington Ship Canal and the northwest end of Lake Union—parked her car and walked out along the pedestrian walkway on the west side of the bridge.

No doubt she felt the wind that never seems to leave the bridge, and the shaking caused by the Metro buses and delivery trucks that drive over the bridge deck on Highway 99. The bridge walkway is narrow, separated from traffic by a short guardrail; on the water side is a two-and-one-half-foot-high fence, barely waist high, to keep pedestrians from falling off.

DeVries climbed the barrier on the north end of the bridge and jumped.

For anyone who wants to, it's easy to climb over that dull metal fence, which sits 167 feet above the Ship Canal. Since 1931, the year the bridge was built, hundreds of people have chosen to do so, jumping to their deaths. An official tally from the Wsahington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) puts the total at 280 or an average of four suicides per year. Some law-enforcement officials consider that figure on the low side. Thousands more have stood on the bridge and contemplated their end—one man reportedly smoking a cigarette and taking in the sweeping views to downtown Seattle and Mount Rainier—before Seattle police officers arrived to talk them away from the edge. Police officers are on the bridge two or three times a week, but 98 percent of the time they manage to talk a would-be jumper away from an almost certain death.

But no one called the police about DeVries. She stood on the Fremont end of the bridge. Looking over the edge, she would have seen the green metal siding and dark brick of office buildings that house Adobe and Impinj, and the faded pavement of a parking lot just south of 34th Street. If she'd looked to the south a few hundred yards, she would have seen where the canal slides under the bridge.

No one knows what she was looking at or how long she stood on the bridge before jumping to her death, landing in the parking lot below.

Eight other people committed suicide from the bridge in 2006, tying the record of 1972. Poor people jump from the bridge, and so do the rich and well connected. In 2003, SeaTac City Council member Kay Marie Lasco jumped to her death from the bridge one evening.

Seattle has long been known as America's suicide capital, although statistically that term more properly applies to Denver or Las Vegas, both of which have higher suicide rates than does Seattle. (The rate here is about 13 per 100,000; in Denver and Los Vegas, the rate is 17 to 19 per 100,000. The national average in 2004 was 11 per 100,000, according to the American Association of Suicidology.)

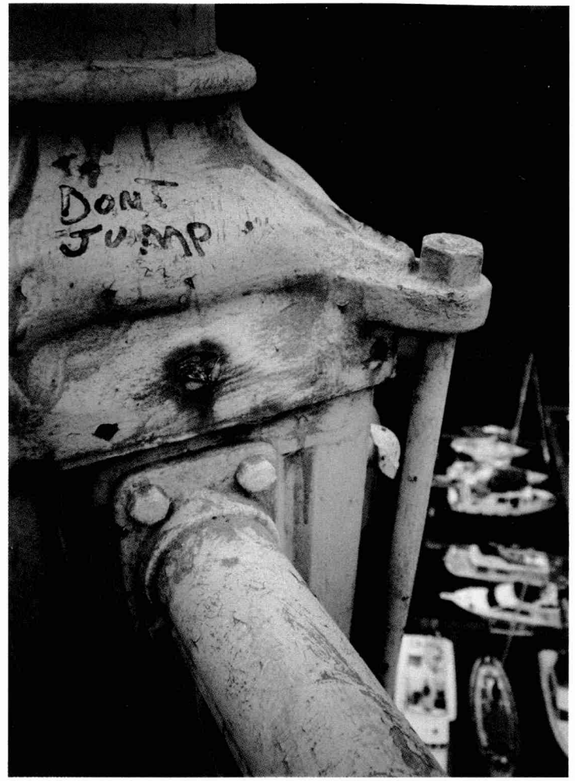
Still, the rate of suicide in Seattle runs about 20 percent ahead of the national average—and three times the murder rate in the city—and Seattleites have long known that the Aurora Bridge is where many people go to do their business. So many have jumped from this one structure that it is believed to be one of the worst suicide bridges in the world; in the United States it trails only the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco.

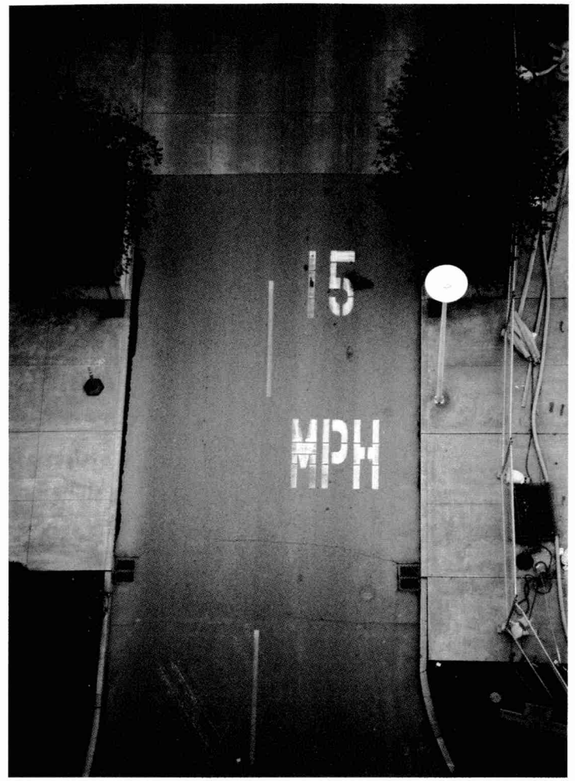
In one of the worst cities for suicide in the world, the Aurora Bridge is the single worst place. It's an ugly piece of Seattle's social history that, in recent years, has gotten even uglier.

Seattle police say that about half of all jumpers from the bridge don't land in the water. Instead, they hit land. Suicides, especially public ones, are a problem—and not just for the victims, friends and family members. Citizens have on occasion encountered the bodies of suicides in Volunteer Park on Capitol Hill and on sidewalks downtown before the bodies were covered. But in Fremont, workers, residents and visitors have witnessed people falling 100-plus feet into parking lots, onto streets and onto parked cars. Only a few years ago there was little commercial activity so close to the Aurora span. But the southern edge of Seattle's Fremont neighborhood lies underneath or near much of the bridge, and that area is a burgeoning high-tech hub, home to hundreds of people who work at Adobe, Impinj, Getty Images and Google, among others. Dozens of houseboats and traditional homes, and a few apartment and condo complexes, are also nearby.

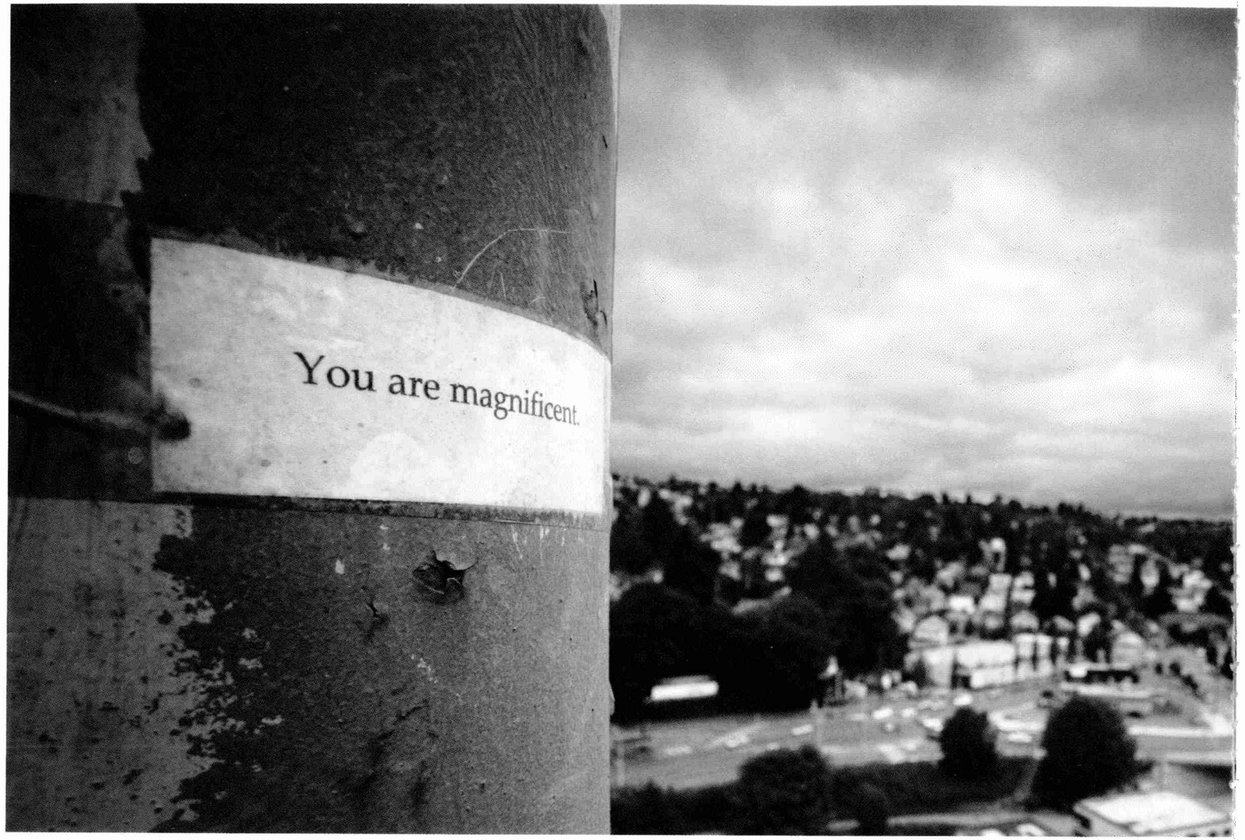
Employees at Adobe, Impinj and other area businesses complain of the psychological trauma caused by seeing mangled bodies. The gruesome images haunt the witnesses.

What can be done to end this scenario? One Seattleite thinks he has the answer. All he needs is for the state Legislature to listen to him.





OPPOSITE: FROM THE BRIDGE DECK, MESSAGES SPEAK TO WOULD-BE JUMPERS; LIFE BELOW GOES ON, WITH OCCASIONAL, BUT DISTURBING INTERLUDES



WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT ON THE BRIDGE DECK AND VIEWS OF FREMONT

Word of DeVries' suicide spread quickly that May weekend. Rachel Izzo, 17, a soccer teammate, says she found out before a game that weekend, and was shocked by the news, as were family and friends. The coach gathered the players around and nervously told them that DeVries had killed herself in a jump from the Aurora Bridge. The game was cancelled.

That evening, approximately 100 people gathered in the parking lot and an adjoining plaza, lighting candles and placing them on the pavement. Someone chalked a heart on the ground near the spot where DeVries' young life ended, says Izzo.

The candles were still there on Monday morning, as was the heart—somewhat faded—when Ryan Thurston arrived for work at Impinj, a company that designs semiconductors and radio-frequency ID chips. Thurston, 30, has worked for the company since graduating from the University of Washington in 2001 and is now a senior design engineer.

Without knowing very much, Thurston knew everything. Since Impinj moved to the new office complex from another Fremont location in 2005, Thurston has seen four, maybe five, bodies—he admits he's lost count. He remembers one from this year vividly: a man, his body crumpled at an odd angle in the same parking lot where DeVries died. His impact on the ground was so great that his tennis shoes had flown 10 feet away from his body.

Enough is enough, is how Thurston recalls his reaction that morning: "When you start realizing it can be prevented, that's when it lights a fire under your ass. Why has this gone on this long? It doesn't make any sense." Thurston decided it was time for someone to push the city and the state to erect a suicide barrier on the bridge.

He wasn't the only person bothered by the aftermath of the jumpers. Few of the hundreds of employees in the vicinity could have known in advance that, along with the splashy coffeehouses and restaurants in the redeveloped strip of "the center of the universe," they'd also have a ringside seat at some poor soul's sad end.

Jumpers have been leaping from the bridge for decades, of course, but in recent years safety concerns for bystanders has increased, says Michael Jerrett, executive director of the Fremont Chamber of Commerce. Earlier this year, a man who jumped from the bridge well south of the canal took down the power lines along 34th Street, knocking out electricity to the neighborhood. In recent years, jumpers have also landed on parked cars and narrowly missed bystanders.

"You have someone taking their own life and you have a falling body that could land on somebody," says Jerrett. "Residents and businesses are concerned." And while no one is oblivious to the plight of those taking their own lives, the concern for bystanders is not a frivolous one.

Sgt. Richard O'Neill, president of the Seattle Police Officers Guild, says that dealing with jumpers on the bridge deck is dangerous for officers. In one instance this spring, a North Precinct officer attempted to wrestle a distraught woman away from the bridge's edge, a move that could have just as easily resulted in the officer falling from the span.

One assistant chief in the Seattle Police Department (SPD) recounts how jumpers have almost hit rowers on the Ship Canal for years, and emphasizes the risk to SPD Harbor Patrol divers who try to recover bodies, often working at depths of 30 feet amid underwater debris. "The dangers that that bridge poses are wide reaching," he says. "People are impacted physically and psychologically."

In the summer of 2006, the assistant chief was bicycling with his young daughter on the Burke-Gilman Trail one afternoon. "She looked back and asked me for a drink of water. She took the water bottle and looks up and there's a guy on the rail of the bridge. She was 10 years old at the time. He had been out there for a while. We had divers set up and there were officers on the bridge talking to him," he says. He was able to turn his daughter's attention elsewhere just before the man jumped—but she saw his body in the water. When she asked what happened, he improvised: "I told her it was some guy doing stunts."

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Efforts to stop those bent on suicide have fallen to Seattle police, who try to talk potential jumpers from the edge. Last December, six phones in yellow call boxes were installed on the bridge, connected to Seattle's Crisis Clinic. The hope: that those who want to jump will have second thoughts and pick up the phone to talk with a counselor. By midsummer, four people had jumped to their deaths from the bridge, while the SPD reported that one person had used the phone instead of jumping.

Not long after the phones were installed, the Fremont Chamber of Commerce organized stakeholder meetings, to discuss possible solutions. Thurston and several members of Seattle FRIENDS (FRemont Individuals & Employees Nonprofit to Decrease Suicides, seattlefriends.org), a nonprofit group he'd started, began showing up, hoping for a solution that would end the jumping. A high school friend of Thurston's killed himself with a shotgun a few years ago, making the issue personal for the engineer.

One immediate option was to close down the pedestrian walkways on either side of the bridge. But the walkways are used daily by a small stream of pedestrians and bicyclers. Stan Suchan, a spokesman for the WSDOT, also points out that the bridge is part of a public highway, and the state cannot ban bicycles from highways. If the walkways were closed, Suchan says, some bicyclists would inevitably pedal out into the heavy and fast-moving traffic on Highway 99. There are no shoulders separating the walkway from traffic.

"Are we trading one problem for another?" is how Suchan answers that idea. He says fencing is the most promising option.

Both Washington, D.C., and Toronto have installed barriers along so-called suicide bridges. Suicides from the Duke Ellington Memorial Bridge in D.C. and the Prince Edward Viaduct in Toronto have virtually stopped as a result.

Suchan and Greg Hirakawa, a spokesman for the Seattle Department of Transportation, which maintains the Aurora Bridge, says a Washington State Department of Transporation estimate puts the cost of a barrier at about $5 million. It would take at least two years from the time the state Legislature funds a barrier for engineering studies to be completed and a barrier to be in place.

In the meantime, anywhere from another eight to 15 people will jump from the bridge, judging from recent history. Half of them will end up hitting land. Workers in the area are shy about going on the record, and officials at both Adobe and Impinj declined to comment for this story. But, based on conversations with people who work at these and other area companies, it is clear that some people who witness the jumps or their aftermath are left with psychological scars.

"It sort of halts the day," says Nellie Caldito, a member of Seattle FRIENDS. She works at Impinj, but, like Thurston and others who work there, stresses that she is not speaking for her employer.

Some employees have had to take time off from work. Others have gone to counseling.

"My motivation is, if this is going to be a repetitive theme as part of my employment, I'd rather put a stop to it," says Magdalene Adenau, a recruiter at Impinj and a member of FRIENDS. She adds that potential employees she's spoken with are bothered by the likelihood of seeing dead bodies outside their office windows.

While there is a consensus among cops, government officials, mental health experts and citizens like Thurston that a barrier must go up, the state Legislature is the body that has to approve and fund the plan. With the 2008 legislative session just 60 days long, legislators are likely to shy away from adding new spending to the state's biennial budget (odd-numbered years are budget years in Olympia).

All the same, Thurston and members of his group aren't waiting. By midsummer, they had met with six area legislators. To date, Thurston has been unsuccessful in his efforts to personally meet with state Rep. Frank Chopp (D-Wallingford), who, as speaker of the House, is the second most powerful politician in Olympia after Gov. Christine Gregoire. His 43rd District seat includes Fremont and the bridge. Chopp has long championed mental health causes in Olympia.

In a session where it's difficult to undertake new initiatives, Chopp's support would be crucial. "If Frank Chopp were convinced this ought to be done, you'd be 90 percent of the way there," says Randy Revelle, a former King County executive who now works as a lobbyist for the Washington State Hospital Association. Revelle and Chopp were instrumental in getting the Legislature to reform mental health insurance laws in the state in 2005 and 2007.

"If it's [the cost of a barrier] $5 million and saves some lives, then it's worth it," says Chopp. "We're willing to support some resources to help with the situation. But I don't want to guarantee anything until I talk to others in the Legislature."

Chopp's 43rd District colleague, state Rep. Jamie Pedersen (D-Capitol Hill), says that the legislature should take up the issue next year. But he's non-committal on funding the barrier, he says.

"I think there's no question we need to take it up next session," says Pedersen. "I'm not set on what the outcome should be. But it's a significant enough issue that we need to spend some effort on it between now and the session."

MENTAL HEALTH EXPERTS HAVE NEVER BEEN ABLE TO SCIENTIFICALLY ACCOUNT FOR THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPERATIVE BEHIND WHY SOME PEOPLE JUMP INSTEAD OF HANGING THEMSELVES...

Suicide has been with mankind since the dawn of time—and those who take their life by jumping from a high point have been around at least as long. There are jumpers in Greek mythology, Shakespeare, classical literature and modern advertising. Metaphorically, the idea of jumping to one's death has a poetry and beauty to it, writes Kay Redfield Jamison, a professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, and the best-selling author of *An Unquiet Mind* and a study of suicide entitled Night Falls Fast. But mental health experts have never been able to scientifically account for the psychological imperative behind why some people jump instead of hanging themselves, for example. The best that experts like Jamison can offer is that suicide is always an impulsive act, regardless of whatever advance planning might exist, and that jumpers tend to be the most impulsive suicides of all.

Jumping is not the most common method of suicide in the United States. Death by gun accounts for about 55 percent of America's 32,000 suicides each year. Jumping accounted for 9 percent of suicides in King County in 2005, according to the King County medical examiner.

For whatever reason, barriers on bridges have been one of the few effective antisuicide technologies. Scientific studies of jumping behavior are few, but a study of the Duke Ellington Bridge found that once the barriers went up there, would-be jumpers didn't simply move to the next bridge in town. And a long-term study by a University of California Berkeley psychologist of people who'd been stopped before leaping from the Golden Gate Bridge found that the wannabe jumpers went on to lead fairly ordinary lives and, typically, did not attempt suicide again.

That haunts Izzo, DeVries' friend.

"I feel if the bridge had had a barrier, Maren wouldn't have died," says Izzo, a student at Holy Names Academy.

"I think it's fairly clear that barriers work," says Don Kuch, clinical director of Seattle's Crisis Clinic. "Just as a general principle, people who are considering suicide but are not chronically suicidal, if you remove their first choice of a means of suicide, oftentimes it prevents them from using a second-choice method."

In 1996, a *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* article detailed the feelings of four people who'd jumped from the bridge and survived. All of them reported relishing their lives since their jumps, despite chronic physical injuries—lost eyesight and broken bones among them—resulting from their falls.

On July 13, 2007, a Friday, a young man jumped from the Aurora Bridge to the water below. He was pulled from the water by the SPD Harbor Patrol before he drowned, and apparently survived his injuries. Owing to medical privacy laws, his fate—whether he lived or died—is not public information.

Thurston, who was at work then, estimates that as many as 40 people saw the jump or the immediate aftermath and the 15 emergency personnel who responded to the scene. "A few of the construction workers saw the jump—they looked distraught," wrote Thurston in an e-mail to me that morning. "There is *always* talk about it afterwards, either through email or hall conversations here at work," he added in the same e-mail.

For the workers and residents near the bridge, the question isn't whether a barrier should be built—they understand only too well the necessity—but when. No one relishes a drawn-out debate and funding delays in the Legislature—something that will surely mean more lives lost, and more deaths witnessed.

Meanwhile, in the parking lot where DeVries died, a new office building is under construction. One side of the new building will lie almost directly under the bridge, increasing worries among area workers.

Says Adenau, the recruiter at Impinj, "It's only a matter of time, with the new building being built, that someone passing by could be hit." S