

"You can't just go there, pick up the phone and say, 'I'll solve all your problems.'" André Lavoie, crisis-line worker

MONDAY CLOSE-UP

FILM CRITIC **ANDRÉ LAVOIE** takes on an important second vocation during the holiday season: He is one of the volunteers who are answering the phones at Suicide Action Montreal

A life-saving role

CHARLIE FIDELMAN GAZETTE HEALTH REPORTER

Every holiday season, André Lavoie is among a special breed of volunteers who spend extra time manning a suicide help line between Christmas and New Year's.

Unlike the distressed people calling in to the crisis hotline, Lavoie says he has never contemplated suicide.

But no one is immune to life's up and downs, says Lavoie, a film critic for the French-language daily newspaper *Le Devoir*, who has been a volunteer at Suicide Action Montreal for nearly four years.

"It changed my life," said Lavoie, who started volunteering 15 years ago at *Gai Écoute*, a gay resource telephone line, before moving on to the Montreal suicide group.

He also hosts a monthly support and information evening for family and friends of people who are suicidal.

Gazette: Why do you volunteer at Suicide Action Montreal? And why during the holidays in particular?

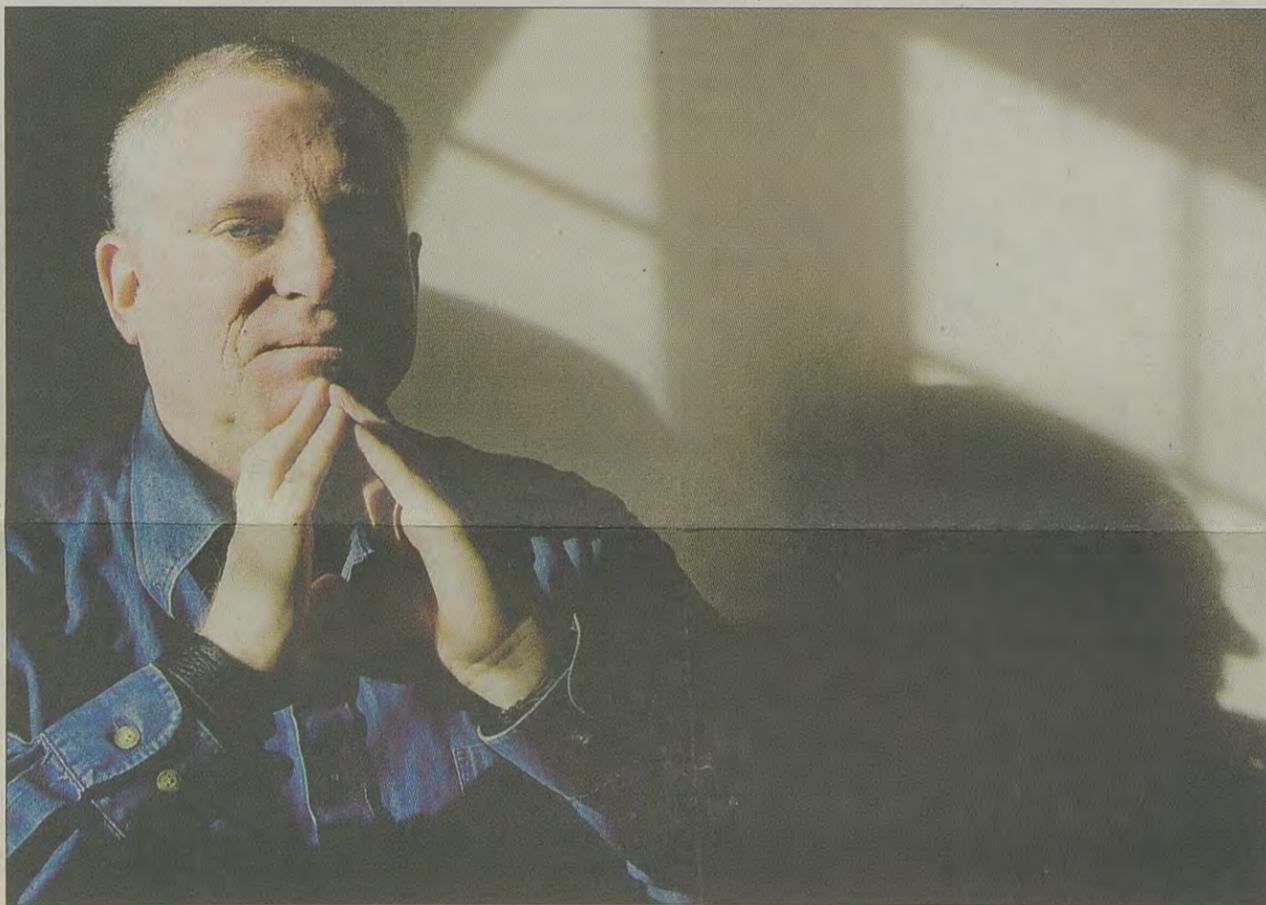
Lavoie: About 15 years ago, I thought I was isolated and lonely and things didn't go well for me. Rather than sit at home and wait for change, I thought, 'If you want to be helped, you have to reach out.'

The networking is so amazing. And it gave me another perspective on life. No one's life is perfect; sometimes you are lonely, tired or desperate. But there is always someone who is worse off than you. During the Christmas holidays, many volunteers are not available, so I give more of my time on the line. I make time for that.

What's the atmosphere like at the Montreal hotline?

It's a nice place to be, friendly and comfortable. You are there for four hours at a time and sometimes deal with dangerous situations, so if it's not beautiful, then things can be more depressing.

What I really like are the people I work with: older, younger—I'm 43—and from different backgrounds and different parts of society. I'm shar-



PIERRE OBENDRAUF THE GAZETTE

Le Devoir's André Lavoie has been a volunteer at Suicide Action Montreal for almost four years. "We're here to help them," he says of the anguished people who call the crisis line. "But I'm just a landmark on the road, not the turn."

ing my time, thoughts and experiences with government workers, teachers, writers, a policewoman—people I would never meet in my daily life.

It's incredibly enriching and rewarding. It gives you a way to see life in a bigger, larger perspective.

What do you think of the French cult film *Le Père Noël est une ordure*, a black comedy spoofing behind-the-scenes events at a crisis hotline?

I've seen three versions of the story: the original, the remake *Mixed Nuts* (with Steve Martin) and the play. And I can say—you won't be surprised—that it's not like that. It's funnier in the film than in real life.

Should suicide be off-limits as a farce?

It's a delicate subject. But a

sensitive writer, actor or playwright can talk about anything. In *Tales of the City* (a TV miniseries), a girl with no suicide training is told to pick up the phone. ... In reality, that never happens. You can't just go there, pick up the phone and say, "I'll solve all your problems."

What about the perception that calls to the suicide line increase during the Christmas holidays?

We tend to think that, at Christmas and New Year's, people will be calling more often because they are alone or suffering, but it's not so. Six months ago, during the St. Jean Baptiste fête, I was sure everyone was celebrating at the park. We were three volunteers and all three lines were busy with cases that were really serious—and on a

IN THE NEWS THIS WEEK

Since the inception of Suicide Action Montreal in 1984, its mission has been to prevent suicide and help survivors of suicide cope.

The point of entry is the telephone number: 514-723-4000. Trained volunteers have answered more than 455,000 calls, including 416,500 from suicidal people, approximately 30,000 from individuals concerned that someone they knew was suicidal, and about 8,500 from people mourning someone who committed suicide.

Are you feeling desperate, alone or hopeless? Call 514-723-4000. (Outside Montreal, phone 1-866-277-3553.) The free, 24-hour hotline is for anyone in suicidal crisis or emotional distress. Call for yourself or someone you care about.

beautiful summer day.

There's no exact science to this. But when a well-known personality or celebrity dies, like writer Nelly Arcan, there's an immediate increase in the calls.

For sure, holidays can be a

period of great anguish or anxiety at finding yourself with your family—in some cases it's super anxiety.

What do you mean?

Each of us has a tool box for dealing with problems, but

family dynamics can exacerbate situations.

Maybe you were rejected because you're a drug addict, or for being gay, or there's a divorce and you've lost custody of your children. You can imagine the anguish of someone who can't see his children ... and he might also have lost his job or be dealing with an illness. Or you were sexually abused as a child. So how do you deal with a family celebration in which one of the two people you loved most has betrayed you?

What do volunteers do in these situations?

You cannot obliterate the past, only use it to go forward. Some people can do it marvelously, but for others it's just beyond their control. We're here to help them. But I'm just a landmark on the road, not the turn. Often, the people who call us know what to do; they just need a sympathetic ear and some self-confidence.

Suffering can render us blind. You can be in pain, for example, from a foot injury and forget that everything else might be going fine.

Sometimes we help modify the perception of the problem and reorient them toward solutions. You can lose sight of the person you are—creative, smart, sweet and talented—that you have a loving spouse and children, and are appreciated by your peers, because all you can think about is your own suffering.

It's not that the solutions aren't there, but we've lost sight of them.

What was your best moment?

I was speaking to someone and it was pretty obvious that her workplace was the main problem; it was her source of desperation. I persuaded her to quit and do something else. One week later, she called back and told me I was the one person who really listened to her.

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