

East Fishkill

Living

January 2026



Marisa
Finkelberg's
Mission to
Prevent Suicide

Photo by Louisa Vitardi

POWERED BY



Marisa Finkelberg's Mission to Prevent Suicide

By Jeanne Cotroneo Darrow

Photos by Louisa Vilardi

Driven by love, loss, and the desire to help others, Marisa Finkelberg has become a passionate voice for suicide prevention.

The morning was cool and bright, the kind of crisp Hudson Valley air that wakes you up before the coffee does. On the Walkway Over the Hudson, a sea of people gathered this October—some wearing matching T-shirts, others carrying signs adorned with names and faces. Among them, near the center of the crowd, was Marisa Finkelberg. Her team wore shirts printed with #TeamVin, in memory of her uncle. Their motto? “Team Vin for the Win.”

“It’s been two years now,” Marisa says softly, looking out over the water as the walk began. “But I don’t want his memory to fade. I want people to remember the way he lived, not just how he died.”

For Marisa, this day was not just about honoring her Godfather and uncle. It was about changing the conversation around suicide, about making sure no family had to endure the kind of shock and grief hers did.

GROWING UP IN EAST FISHKILL

Marisa has lived her entire life in East Fishkill, in the house where she grew up with her parents and the family’s small dog, now 16 years old. She has half-siblings—a brother and two sisters—but her closest connection was always with her mom’s brother, Vinny, even though he lived thousands of miles away in Las Vegas.

“Uncle Vinny was the person I called for everything—life advice, job questions, or even if I just wanted to share a life update about the most recent crazy thing I’d done,” says Marisa, reminiscing about the time she visited him in Las Vegas and he dared her to participate in an excursion that included a jump off the Stratosphere—and she did. “He was that person who made life feel like an adventure.”

When she took that memorable trip in August 2018, Marisa had just graduated from Pace Law School and, as a graduate of the Pro Bono Scholars Program, had already passed the bar exam and was practicing at a private law firm in Poughkeepsie. Not long after, she felt called to public service.

“When the opportunity came to switch to the public sector, I took it,” says Marisa. She started at the Dutchess County Public Defender’s Office, then transferred to the Putnam County Legal Aid Society, where she has served as a criminal defense attorney for the past six years.

THE DAY EVERYTHING CHANGED

Vinny had been diagnosed with diabetes, but was reportedly handling it well, even about to come off medication. His grandson was battling brain cancer, and though it was a heavy load for any family, Vinny seemed, from the outside, to be managing.

But on July 6, 2023, “my mom and uncles all got this strange, cryptic text from him. Everyone started calling him, but no one could get an answer,” Marisa remembers. “My uncle Michael called my mom, and I heard her crying. He had died by suicide.”

The news hit like a physical blow. Vinny had been enjoying his retired life, surrounded by friends and dogs, and he was proud of his service in the Air Force. “There were no warning signs. None,” Marisa says, still in shock.

TURNING GRIEF INTO ACTION

Not long after his death, scrolling through Instagram, Marisa came across a post about the “Out of the Darkness” walks for suicide prevention, organized by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP). Without hesitation, she created a team in Vinny’s memory. She designed shirts, rallied friends and family, and together they raised more than \$2,500 for the cause. “It felt good to do something,” she says, “taking all that grief and turning it into action.”

Maria Idoni, director of AFSP’s Hudson Valley/Westchester chapter, noticed Marisa’s enthusiasm and commitment and invited her to get more involved. “Maria saw I wanted to make a bigger impact,” Marisa says. “I didn’t want my uncle’s memory to get pushed under the rug just because of how he died.”

Her work with AFSP quickly expanded. In 2023, she began volunteering regularly and attending events, such as International Survivors of Suicide Loss Day, held every November before the holiday season. “It’s a day for people who’ve lost someone to suicide to come together,” she explained. Every year, Marisa also participates at State Capitol Day in Albany, advocating for state lawmakers to mandate bridge fencing on the Hudson Valley’s major bridges, a major focus of her AFSP chapter given the significant number of jumpers.

In 2024, Marisa joined AFSP’s board as secretary. She’s currently helping develop firearm safety and prevention initiatives in the area. “We work with ranges and armories, teaching people how to safely store firearms and that ‘Talk Saves Lives’—how to recognize warning signs, come forward, and connect with help. And that help is as close as dialing 988.”

She’s also undergone ASIST (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training), a program that teaches how to respond to someone who may be having thoughts of suicide. “It’s been helpful in both my work and personal life,” she says. “I can see things I might not have noticed before, and I know what to do if I see them.”

WATCH FOR THESE WARNING SIGNS

Here are signs to watch for:

- Talk of feeling helpless, trapped, a burden to others, or unbearable pain
- Increased use of drugs or alcohol
- Withdrawal from activities

- Sleeping too little or too much
- Isolating from family and friends
- Visiting or calling people to say goodbye
- Aggression or fatigue
- Giving away prized possessions
- One or more of the following moods: depressed, anxious, irritability, rage, agitation, or humiliation

If you’re concerned about someone, talk to them in private. Listen to their story and let them know you care. Ask directly about suicide, calmly and without judgment. Show understanding and take their concerns seriously. Let them know they matter to you. Assume you are the only one who will reach out.

Someone considering suicide is experiencing a life-threatening health crisis and might not believe they can be helped. Keep them safely away from lethal means (like firearms and drugs) and remind them that their suffering is temporary. Do not leave them alone.

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Marisa's shirt honors her Uncle Vinny and reflects her role as a board member of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, where she helps organize events and raise awareness in the community.



A quiet moment of reflection by the Hudson River, a place where Marisa often reconnects with her purpose and her uncle's memory.



HELPING OTHERS THROUGH PAIN

Marisa's advocacy work has already made a difference in ways she couldn't have imagined. A year after Vinny's death, Marisa's best friend lost a family member to suicide. "I was able to help them through it—sharing resources, being there in a way I wouldn't have known how to before," says Marisa. "It doesn't take the pain away, but it makes it a little easier to move through."

She is quick to point out that suicide can happen to anyone. "People think it's something that only affects certain groups, but it doesn't discriminate," she says. "You don't realize how important this cause is until it happens to you."

Vinny was laid to rest at the Veterans Memorial Cemetery on Long Island, with the military honors he had requested. For Marisa, his funeral was a reminder of how much he gave—to his country, to his family, to his friends. "He was proud of his service," she says. "And I'm proud of him."

These days, between her work as a public defender and her AFSP board duties, Marisa's schedule is full. But she still makes time to prepare for the walks, trainings, and outreach events. "It's not something I can set aside," she says. "It's part of me now."

At this year's walk, as the crowd moved together across the Walkway, Marisa felt the familiar mix of grief and gratitude: grief for what was lost, and gratitude for the people who now walk beside her. "Every step is for him," she says. "And for the people who are still here, who might be struggling, I want them to know there's hope, that they can get through it, and that they are not alone."

If you or someone you know is in crisis, call or text 988 or text TALK to 741741. Learn more about the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and how to become a Suicide Prevention Advocate at afsp.org ♦

Marisa shares these moments with Vinny, whose guidance, humor, and love shaped her life.

Courtesy of Marisa Finkelberg.

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