Farm Stress Management Fatality File

Ginnie pauses at the desk where she found her husband Matt's letter on the night he died.

"My dearest love," it began, and continued for pages. "I have torment in my head."

On the morning of his last day, 12 May 2011, Matt stood in the kitchen of their farmhouse.

"I can't think," he told Ginnie. "I feel paralyzed."

It was planting season, and stress was high. Matt worried about the weather and worked around the clock to get his crop in the ground on time. He hadn't slept in three nights and was struggling to make decisions.

"I remember thinking 'I wish I could pick you up and put you in the car like you do with a child,'" Ginnie says. "And then I remember thinking … and take you where? Who can help me with this? I felt so alone."

Ginnie felt an "oppressive sense of dread" that intensified as the day wore on. At dinnertime, his truck was gone and Matt wasn't answering his phone. It was dark when she found the letter. "I just knew," Ginnie says. She called 911 immediately, but by the time the authorities located his truck, Matt had taken his life.

Ginnie describes her husband as strong and determined, funny and loving. They raised two children together. He would burst through the door singing the Mighty Mouse song – "Here I come to save the day!" – and make everyone laugh. He embraced new ideas and was progressive in his farming practices, one of the first in his county to practice no-till, a farming method that does not disturb the soil. "In everything he did, he wanted to be a giver and not a taker," she says.

After his death, Ginnie began combing through Matt’s things. “Every scrap of paper, everything I could find that would make sense of what had happened.” His phone records showed a 20-minute phone call to an unfamiliar number on the afternoon he died.

When she dialed the number, Dr Mike Rosmann answered.

“My name is Virginia Peters,” she said. “My husband died of suicide on May 12th.”

There was a pause on the line.

“I have been so worried,” said Rosmann. “Mrs Peters, I am so glad you called me.”

Rosmann, an Iowa farmer, is a psychologist and one of the nation’s leading farmer behavioral health experts. He often answers phone calls from those in crisis. And for 40 years, he has worked to understand why farmers take their lives at such alarming rates – currently, higher rates than any other occupation in the United States.

More than 900 farmers died by suicide in five upper Midwest states.