

Pass It On®...

Friendship Disperses the Darkest Nights in Alaska.

How two men find hope in friendship to prevent suicide. A [StoryCorps](#) story.

When the winter sun sets in Kasigluk, Alaska, it won't rise fully for three months. But Alaskans are a hardened breed. They continue to work undaunted, many in trades that require them to be outdoors in extreme conditions. The isolation, the darkness and the unforgiving weather can take a toll on the residents.

The results can be sobering. Alaska's suicide rate is twice the national average. Don Reardon reflects on this tragedy and how it affected him in high school: "The first person that I knew intimately who took his own life was a teammate of mine. I was just a freshman in high school. He had moved into Bethel to play basketball. We were good friends. And then, that summer, I found out he took his life. That fall, I lost another classmate. Pretty soon, it was like a whole gym full of people that I knew personally who are gone."

Qaiyaan Harcharek lived in the northernmost town in the United States: Utqiagvik. Harcharek had similar experiences with suicide in his part of Alaska, a few hundred miles from where Reardon grew up. But his were more personal. "I can relate. 100 percent. All of my adult life, I've had struggles with mental health and depression, and I'm a suicide survivor ... I attempted it."

Reardon and Harcharek met when Reardon traveled north. They became fast friends, brothers who loved the Alaskan culture and the wilderness. The tundra reaches to an endless horizon, too high in elevation to support trees. There is more sky than land, a terrain you can traverse for weeks and not see another human figure. It is a place where ancient mammoth tusks wait to be discovered, a place so spiritual that the past and the present are the same.

It is summer, and the temperatures are somewhere in the mid-fifties. Harcharek is shirtless, with a crest of tribal tattoos across his chest, symbols of the sacredness of nature. The vast distance could symbolize that space between human beings that leaves them feeling alone in a universe of cold. But

Reardon and Harcharek stand together, bridging the gap of emotions with friendship.

"It's as if we've known each other our whole life," Reardon says.

Harcharek reflects on his darkest day and what pulled him out of the abyss. "I had this vision," he begins, his voice breaking with emotion. "It's hard to describe, but it was my wife and children reaching up to me. And there were many, many silhouettes around them of people, with faces, and yours was one of them." It is Reardon's turn to grow emotional. He chuckles a bit, covering up the feelings but affirming his brotherly bond.

"What I do know," Harcharek continues, "is that it was the love that I received from each and every one of those people that saved my life."

Reardon looks forward. "I appreciate you, man. We need to get out on the land together and just go spend some time in the wilderness."

Harcharek answers, "Absolutely. That is my medicine."

The friendship, the wilderness, the feeling that life reaches out beyond our expectations, beyond our dreams, to endless affirmations of living.

Friendship...[PassItOn.com](https://www.passiton.com)

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