



# SURVIVORS

**after suicide** A Program of Didi Hirsch Community Mental Health Center

APRIL/MAY/JUNE 2005 • VOLUME 18, NO. 2 • PUBLISHED QUARTERLY

## On Celebrating Ed's Birthday

Rick Mogil  
Studio City, CA

August 31, 2004, would have been Ed's fiftieth birthday. He often said he would not live to be fifty. Sometimes I believed him. Most often I did not. And therein lies my guilt.

I feel guilty because I did not believe often enough or strongly enough that he would actually do something to end his life. *Yes, yes, yes*, I know I probably would not have been able to stop him. But there is always that niggling doubt that I may have missed an opportunity to save him.

*Now that's a real egotistical statement!* As if I had the power to stop a runaway train just by holding out my hand. OK, I may have been able to convince him to get help again, but I know it would not have lasted. He still would have killed himself, just a little later, that's all.

This is the curse of all survivors.

If only I had insisted... If only I was there to...

*If only he would have let me...*

I should have known...

*I saw the look in her eyes and knew...*

I could have done more...

(Add any suitable phrase you may have used or heard.)

So what do we do with this guilt? *continued on page 4*

## Sweet Surprise at Holiday Potluck



Brad and Erica Watkins presented Didi Hirsch President and CEO Kita S. Curry, Ph.D., with a check for \$6,000 collected in memory of Erica's brother, Dougie Sweet. In November, family and friends came together to honor

Dougie's life in a charitable event his relatives coined "Sweetwater." Erica surprised Dr. Curry with the check during her presentation at December's potluck. *See page 5.*

## SAVE THE DATE

### SAS Co-facilitator/Telephone Support Counselor Training

SATURDAY, APRIL 2, 2005 • 9:00 A.M. – 5:00 P.M.

*See Tom's column, page 2*

## My Husband's Suicide

Kate W. Lyon  
Los Angeles, CA

There have been many times over the last two years when I have wondered what Greg, my husband, was thinking as he went downstairs to the garage, carrying our hope chest, knowing that in a short while he

would be dead. I have wondered what thoughts raced through his head as he took the duct tape and sealed the vent on the common wall of our town home, obviously concerned that he might poison our neighbors as the carbon monoxide filled the garage. I've imagined his thoughts as he took the garden hose and taped it to the exhaust pipe, ran it in through the back passenger window, and then *continued on page 7*

## Strings of Love

Diane L. Williams  
Torrance, CA

On September 7, 1996, my beloved father took his life. It was quite unexpected and to this day unexplained. In a handwritten addendum to his will, my father left each of his children a family heirloom. I received my great grandmother's violin.

This violin was broken and battered. It came in a worn and weathered case that crumbled every time it was touched. It looked to be beyond repair, but since it had been in our family for more than 150 years and my father had left it to me, it was special. I wrapped the old case in a blanket and tucked it away in my closet. *continued on page 5*

**SAS exists to help people resolve their grief and pain in their own personal way, and to help them move forward in their lives, positively and productively.**



Tom Rankin, J.D., M.A.

## Tom's Column

Once a year we train survivors who have been through the eight-week SAS group to become support group co-facilitators and/or telephone support counselors. This year the training will be held at Didi Hirsch in

Culver City from **9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on Saturday, April 2, 2005**. If you are interested in co-facilitating groups or offering telephone support to new survivors while they are waiting for a group, please call me at (310) 751-5370. Even if you have previously expressed interest in the training, please call me again to confirm your availability.

Is co-facilitation or telephone support counseling a good fit for you? Typically survivors become involved as volunteers at least one to two years after the death of their loved one. The key issue is whether you have processed your own grief sufficiently such that you can focus on helping others through their loss. This does not mean that you will not become emotional in a support group or on the telephone: working with survivors is an emotional experience. However, you should ask yourself whether your loss is still

so fresh that your natural emotional reactions would distract from helping new survivors.

The training will be a combination of lectures, role-plays, reading materials, simulated groups, and tips from experienced therapists and co-facilitators. Lunch will be provided. Participation in the training does not guarantee that you will be asked to be a co-facilitator or telephone support counselor: not everyone is suited to this work. However, no previous counseling or psychological experience is required. Most people who go through the training report that they learn a great deal and that they find it very rewarding and healing to be able to help other survivors.

Please participate if you can! This is your chance to give back to SAS for the comfort you found through the program. SAS cannot be there for other survivors without your help. Most importantly, new survivors need your experience and compassion. Finally, every SAS volunteer feels that they are honoring their loved one by helping other survivors.

Tom ♡

*Tom Rankin serves as The Coordinator of the Survivors After Suicide Program and as Suicide Prevention Educator. He can be reached at 310.751.5370.*



## Four-CD Album of Memorial Songs Completes Series

With fifty tracks by artists from folk icon Joan Baez to the debut recording by a youth chorus, the third volume of the *Before Their Time* series has just been released. This collection of songs, written and performed in memory of people who died young, completes a collection that at once comforts and consoles, and demonstrates music's healing properties.

What began in 1998 as a local project prompted by the suicide of Michael Whitman's oldest son, Breck, has now spread around the world because the music connects with a universal human need. The death of anyone "before their time" impacts surviving relatives and friends profoundly. The *Before Their Time* albums help those who are grieving, even years later, by providing music's spiritual support during recovery from the grief and depression often felt by survivors after an untimely death. All revenue from album sales of *Before Their Time* benefits the National Hospice Foundation, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, the Visiting Nurse Alliance and Hospice of Vermont and New Hampshire, and the NH Youth Suicide Prevention Association, which have received almost \$40,000 from sales of Volumes I and II. See [www.beforetheirtime.org](http://www.beforetheirtime.org) to hear song samples and to order this four-CD collection. ♡

## Lifekeepers Memory Quilt

**We are starting another Lifekeepers Memory Quilt.** Like the four we have completed, this quilt will serve as a tangible message to educate our nation, our neighbors, and our legislators that we who survive want to help others find a way to live. Our quilts are displayed at national meetings, suicide-related conferences and other events. All 50 states have come together in this joint effort to educate the world about the need to reduce the incidence of suicide. You can share your pictures and sentiments by dedicating a square in the Lifekeepers Memory Quilt, offering the image of your loved one. A \$20 fee covers the cost of material, labor and postage necessary to create your visual tribute. You will receive a cotton square and instructions on how to proceed.

**Yes, I want to create a quilt square to honor:**

\_\_\_\_\_

Send the material and instructions to me:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number(s): \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

Enclosed is my \$20 check or money order made out to Mary Halligan to cover the cost of material, labor and postage.

**Mail to:**

Mary Halligan, 21422 Grant Ave., Torrance, CA 90503  
or call Mary at 310-316-4392 for information.



## Dr. Jay Nagdimon Moves On

We wish a fond farewell to Dr. Jay Nagdimon who, after ten years directing the Suicide Prevention Center, is moving on to pursue new interests. Dr. Nagdimon has spoken with hundreds of survivors over the years, co-facilitated the eight-week groups, and oversaw program development in the SAS program. Dr. Nagdimon is known for his warmth, compassion, and positive energy. His presence in the department will be dearly missed. We wish him well in his future endeavors. *For anyone wishing to reach Dr. Nagdimon, please contact Tom Rankin at (310) 751-5370.*

## The SPAN USA Conference in Washington, D.C. : Emotional, Educational, Motivational

Mary Halligan, Torrance, CA

I attended my first SPAN USA conference at the Capital Hilton last year, joining another first-timer, Nancy Marx, and my two favorite people, Sam and Lois Bloom. The three-day conference, which started on Sunday, September 19th, proved to be emotional, educational and motivational. Carla Fine, author of *No Time To Say Goodbye: Surviving the Suicide of a Loved One*, signed books that morning. I consider myself fortunate to have met Ms. Fine a year and a half ago in Santa Fe at the AAS conference. Ms. Fine still greets you with questions about whom you lost and how you are doing. I appreciated her generosity and compassion.

Next, we boarded buses heading to the Lincoln Memorial where we displayed quilts and listened to speeches. An 11-year-old named Parker and his nine-year-old sister touched the hearts of everyone when they talked about losing their father to suicide. Like their father, they both suffer from bipolar disorder. They spoke of how, with the strict monitoring of their behavior by their mother and the correct adjustment of the proper medication by their doctor, they're learning to lead normal lives. Their courageous testimony was an inspiration to us all.

Monday began with a keynote address by U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Richard Carmona, who reminded us that in our country alone, a suicide is attempted every 45 seconds and completed once every 15 minutes. He stressed the importance of keeping mental health parity a top issue for our legislators.

Senator Gordon Smith's wife, Sharon Smith, spoke next. She described how her son's suicide catalyzed the formation of the Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act, legislation that authorizes \$82 million over three years to provide state and local governments and nonprofit organizations with grants to develop and expand youth suicide prevention and intervention programs. Sharon expressed

*continued on page 4*



*A gift, I'm told, you've left behind,  
That I must seek and find;  
But pain too deep, and missing you  
Have blocked my open mind.*

—Iris Bolton, from "The Suicide of My Son," ©1977

The idea of any gifts arising from our grief may have seemed inconceivable at first, but with time, our gifts are revealed. Later in Iris's poem, we discover that the music her son composed became her gift. Dr Nina Gutin's brother, Jeff, died by suicide in April of 1995. She shares her gift:

I could sense the disbelief, the skepticism around the room. Here I was, leading a survivors' group, telling members that despite my own initial disbelief, such a thing was possible. My brother Jeff's loss to suicide had somehow been transformed into a meaningful gift.

How was it possible to turn something so tragic and traumatic into a gift? For me, the first step was involvement with other survivors who helped validate and normalize my feelings, and who gave me faith that this loss was actually survivable.

But the most important aspect involved a shift from a position of despair and uselessness to one in which I felt I actually had something *to give*. For me, the crucial transformative elements were:

- 1) Gratitude for those who gave me a reason to go on living;
- 2) Gratitude for what/how much I'd been given by others and wanting to "pass this on"; and
- 3) Passion for using my own experience, clinical training and access to resources to make a meaningful difference, both in relation to suicide prevention and for other survivors.

Facilitating my first survivors' group, as challenging as it was, has been yet another gift. Hearing the stories, feeling the heart-wrenching pain of members juxtaposed with my own understanding that this pain is survivable, allowed me to feel hope and offer it back to the group by becoming the example that their own loss and pain was also survivable.

And what a gift to be part of a group in which we engaged in seemingly magical change in just a few weeks—from a place of sadness and despair to one in which we were sharing raucous laughter along with the tears. We connected to each other not only by virtue of our shared loss, but through who we actually are. Being a part of this group has been moving, inspiring and uplifting in ways that I could never have anticipated.

My hope, as I continue my involvement with SAS, is that the gift that I've been given will enable others to discover the gifts potentially embedded in their own painful experiences, and to continue the legacy of giving. ♡

## On Celebrating Ed's Birthday *continued from page 1*

In the beginning we wallow in it. We use it to beat ourselves over the head relentlessly. We point the finger at our heart and say, "Shame on me for not doing something! I have failed my loved one and therefore myself, my family."

But where is the failure, really? Is it because we did not do something or did too much of something? Did someone else not do what he or she was supposed to and we failed to call him or her on it? Did we really see and understand what our loved one was suffering or feeling? Did we fail to save our loved one?

"Ladies and gentlemen of the Jury, have you reached a verdict?"

"Yes your honor, we have. We find the defendant guilty as charged."

Well, that may work for TV in its competition for ratings. But in life such things aren't so readily apparent. Every individual is different as is every suicide—we are all unique even if our story is the same. And short of handcuffing them to ourselves 24 hours a day, we could not be there to stop them if it was their intent to complete their suicide.

I could not see my brother putting a gun to his head and pulling the trigger. I saw him drinking himself into oblivion or driving while drunk and running off the road, but never a conscious effort to end his life.

I lived 1,800 miles away and did not see his daily battle with living. I talked to him on the phone and saw him once or twice a year. And yet I felt as guilty as if I had lived in his home and watched him struggle with his world.

My guilt is borne out of the parental admonition to take care of my baby brothers and my response to Cain's answer to God: I am my brother's keeper. But when does this responsibility end? Is it with his venturing out into the world to establish his life, or is it with the end of mine?

As eldest siblings, I think that our sense of the responsibility remains with us always. Our younger siblings will always be in our charge and we retain residual guilt if something should happen to them whatever the cause. It is what we have been trained to believe.

We have to remember that it is not any failure of ours that has caused our loved ones to end their lives. It is their inability to cope with the life they have. And now we have to cope with our life *without them*. That's the challenge. To cope, to remember—and to become enlightened. To learn the signs of depression and be aware of them in others and us. To keep suicide hotline numbers handy, to seek help, to give help, and to be involved, active and outspoken.

Be an advocate. If your words or actions touch just one person, you will have made a major contribution, and you will have honored your loved one's memory. ♡

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## The SPAN USA Conference *continued from page 3*

her shock and devastation when she discovered that her son Garrett, a very bright and well-liked young man in college, killed himself. In his note, he wrote of how much he loved his parents, and that they wouldn't have to worry about him being in pain anymore. There wasn't a dry eye in the room, including mine.

Jerry and Elsie Weyerauch recognized Dr. Mark L. Rosenberg with a Founder's Award for his significant contributions to suicide prevention. In the 1990s, Dr. Rosenberg was instrumental in bringing the subject of suicide and its prevention to the attention of the federal government and the nation. He has also brought a sense of urgency to the prevention of youth suicide.

One of the educational highlights of the conference for me was "Excellence in Media 101," taught by Joel Roberts, a broadcaster and radio talk show host based in Los Angeles. He said that each of us must carry the "macro" (the statistics, the epidemic of suicide in our nation) and the "micro" (our own story) wherever we might have the opportunity to educate.

There were several Breakout Sessions in the afternoon. I went to several, but my favorite was "An Introduction to Mental Illness" by Dr. Ken Tullis, founder of Suicide

Anonymous, a 12-step program for chronically suicidal people. Dr. Tullis has suffered from addictions, mood disorders, and has attempted suicide seven times. He is an incredible speaker. I attended his workshop in Santa Fe and enjoyed him so much that I had to listen to him again.

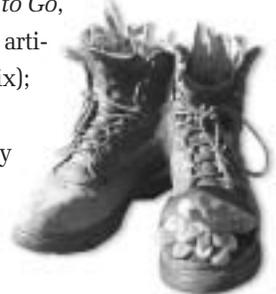
That evening we convened at a town hall meeting to prepare for our visits to Capitol Hill on our final day. We picked up the packages to be delivered to our two senators and 57 congressmen. Each of us took ten or more packages containing advocacy letters from each district for each congressman, California suicide statistics, and a sheet addressing four items of legislation currently on the floor for consideration.

That final day was truly exciting! We had arranged to meet with the legislative aides of Senators Boxer and Feinstein. They were both kind, compassionate and interested. Sam Bloom took the lead, explaining the "macro"—the epidemic of suicide—and each of us shared our own "micro" experiences. The Congressional Awards Presentation, led by Jerry Reed, Executive Director of SPAN USA, was very impressive. Senators Gordon Smith and Chris Dodd, and Representatives Bart Gordon and Harry Reid each spoke about their involvement in the Garrett Lee Smith Act and promised their continued support for similar

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and Ann Ellertson (*Keeping My Husband Alive for My Babies*). Seated, left to right: Erica Watkins (*Sweetwater*) presents a check for \$6,000 to Didi Hirsch President and CEO Kita S. Curry, Ph.D., money she collected in November when family and friends came together to honor her brother's life in a charitable event; and Sharon Gorrell (*A Triangle in the Park*). Deborah Pikul recreated her mother's memorialization of son Jeff and presented the life-affirming workboots planter pictured at right.



## SAS Holiday Potluck:

### *Memorializing Your Loved One*



Dr. Norman Farberow introduced the time-honored tradition of remembering loved ones through memorializations, and spoke of how the process can help us rebuild and reorder our lives while preserving our memories. Nine survivors personalized the experience with their own memorializations. Standing, left to right: Dr. Nina Gutin (*Transformation*, see page three article, "The Gift"); Sam Bloom (*Talking with Sammy*); Diane Williams (*Strings of Love*, her story begins on page one); Linda Delnevo (*Surfing with Jim*); Rick Mogil (*No Place to Go*, author of another page one article, his fifth in a series of six);

## Strings of Love continued from page 1

The violin and its case traveled in that blanket from one closet to the next as I moved a few times in the years that followed.

A few years after my father's death, the violin inspired me to purchase a very inexpensive one, and for about three months I took lessons. It seemed to come naturally and I really enjoyed it, but life got busy and the violin fell by the wayside. This past summer, after moving from West Los Angeles to Torrance, I began taking lessons again. My new teacher was so passionate about music and the violin that I became motivated to really learn to play this beautiful instrument. I had to take my inexpensive violin for some adjustments and went to a violin maker friend of my instructor. I mentioned the antique violin to him and he suggested I bring it in for him to look at.

In passing, I once commented to someone that if I had discretionary funds, I would love to try to have the violin restored. I took the violin in and left it for an estimate, and decided that no matter what, I was going to have it fixed. I was given the money necessary to have the restoration done and came back in a few weeks to pick up the finished product.

I could not believe my eyes when the violin maker took the restored violin out of the case. It was beautiful. When he

played the instrument, it made the most amazing music I had ever heard. I could tell that so much love and care went into the restoration of this instrument. The result was amazing.

I came to realize that this violin reflected my life following my father's death. We were the same—crumbling, broken, looking like a big piece was missing and seemingly beyond repair. However, with some time and a great deal of love, attention and care, I too have been restored. While I am not the same as before my father died, just like the violin is not the same as when my great-grandmother first picked it up, my violin and I have been put back together and my life is now a symphony of beautiful music.

And like the music that comes from my instrument, there are good days and bad days. Some days the bow moves across the strings and it makes the most perfect sound. Other days, something is a little off (I might not even know what), and it doesn't sound as nice. Life is like that—some days I am right on and my life seems like beautiful music. Other days something is just off. But with practice, love and attention, each day can be filled with music.

This past December, I played in a recital for the first time. One of the songs I chose was "Amazing Grace," my father's favorite song. Every time I play I think of my father and the strings of love that bind us forever. ♡

# Contributions 11/01/04 – 1/31/05: *A million thanks for your generosity!*

## IN LOVING MEMORY OF:

**Aiko Nobori** from Amy C. Johnson  
**Alex Janofsky** from Laurie and Ronald Beale, M.D.  
**Andrea Gaynor** from Jeanie and Sanford H. Gaynor, M.D.  
**Brian Andrew Bravman** from Lonnie and Michael Bravman  
**Ann Meurer Cadill** from Mary and Sam Langford  
**Betty Leichhardt** from Melinda Pike  
**Brett Newman** from Ida Atiabi, Kue and Myong Chung, Edward C. Ellis, Rochelle Kaikanahaole, Sandra L. Moman  
**Casey Michael Smith** from Beverly A. Smith  
**Cheryl Lynn Bauer** from Anita J. Walker  
**Craig Robert Stephens** from Art Stephens  
**Damien Cavallaro** from Rosalinda and Dariush Astarai  
**Daniel Boxall** from Tali and Robert Levy  
**Denis L. Svoboda** from Dagmar Svoboda  
**Donna Neil** from Terry Neil  
**Dougie Sweet** from Margaret and Harvey Allen, Shelley and William Anderson, Dee Carter Berger, Jackie and Fred Bodley, Carolyn and Ryan Bramen, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas K. Call, Bradford Colton, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Cranmer, Jacqueline and Steve Dontcho, Jill and Donald Drain

Debra and John Edelston, Skip Fairlee, Janet Garrison, Regina Horrocks, JurisPro.com—Sara Robinson, Connie Mangas, Christine and Lee Merry, Christine and Steve Patterson, Cynthia and Carlos Quintero, Rebar Fabricators—Jeffrey Schroeder, Judie and Richard Sarquiz, Kathleen Sternbach, Michelle M. Stevenson, C.T. and B.A. Watkins, Erica and Brad Watkins, Stacy and Curt White, Victoria and Jeffrey Williams  
**Gerry Shacter** from Mary J. Winic  
**Harris Shapiro** from Jacqueline and Arnold Stern  
**Harry Fujita** from Dorothy Fujita  
**Helen D. Willey** from Susan and Joseph Sullivan  
**Jay McCreavy** from Faye and John McCreavy  
**Jeffrey Allen Gutin** from Nina Gutin, Ph.D.  
**Joseph DeLance** from Sheena DeLance  
**Joshua Erman** from Andrew Erman  
**Jonathan Jacoves** from Jeanne and Ira Jacoves  
**Ken Stranger** from Dorothy Stranger  
**Kimberly Pauli** from Janet and Edward Williams

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Help SAS reduce postage—receive potluck invitations and other announcements via email. Please send an email with your full name and SAS Newsletter in the subject to [jbaas@didihirsch.org](mailto:jbaas@didihirsch.org)

**Lanny** from Francine Davey  
**Laura Roanne Cole** from Barbara and Mel Cole  
**Laura Vierra** from Mark Vierra  
**Mark Loya** from Laura Mattick  
**Michael Morrow** from Linda Morrow  
**Nancy Gould** from Doris and Roy Danchick  
**Patrick Laden** from Marilyn Laden  
**Paul Woodrow** from Laurie Woodrow  
**Rebecca Suzanne Lemmon** from Ann and Robert Lemmon  
**Rhoda Blank** from Sonya Sidney  
**Robert Kane Smith** from Patricia J. Smith  
**Robert L. Vogt, Jr.** from Eileen J. Vogt  
**Sammy Bloom** from Shirlee and Frank Nicolino  
**Zachary Zwiép** from John Zwiép

## IN HONOR OF:

**The marriage of Grace Cheng and Ted Braun** from Thomas Neerken  
**Jilliene Schenkel's birthday** from Evan B. Schenkel, Esq.  
**Jimmy Radon** from Gail M. Radon  
**Sam and Lois Bloom** from Sandra and Thomas Martin  
**Stan and Mary Lelewer** from Ruth and Don Salk

## Calendar of Upcoming Events

### APRIL 2, 2005

#### **Survivors After Suicide (SAS) Co-facilitator/ Telephone Support Counselor Training**

Saturday, April 2, 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.  
at Didi Hirsch Community Mental Health Center in Culver City. See Tom's Column, page two.

### APRIL 13-16, 2005

#### **American Association of Suicidology 38th Annual Conference**

Omni Interlocken Resort, Denver/  
Broomfield, Colorado.  
See [www.suicidology.org](http://www.suicidology.org)

### JULY 16-17, 2005

#### **Out of the Darkness National Overnight Experience in Chicago**

AFSP designed this national walk event to help raise awareness about depression and suicide. Go to [www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org) for online registration. To attend this event with others from Southern California, please contact Susan Celentano at 661.260.3119.

## Sam and Lois Bloom Honored at ACHSA Luncheon

In October, the Association of Community Human Service Agencies (ACHSA) honored Sam and Lois Bloom for their outstanding contributions in suicide prevention and bereavement support. The Blooms received the ACHSA's annual Community Partner award for their more than twenty years of service with Didi Hirsch, SPAN-USA, SPAN-California, and many other organizations.

## The SPAN USA Conference *continued from page 4*

legislation. We got to personally talk, shake hands, and have our pictures taken with these good men. I talked to Senator Smith and thanked him for his support. I also expressed how much we appreciated his wife, Sharon, speaking to us at our conference the day before and how touched we all were with their story.

We spent the rest of the afternoon visiting offices, delivering packages, and asking to speak to any of the congressmen's legislative aides. Some of the aides were gracious, taking the time to talk and ask questions. This helped us reinforce the message that California's constituents want our congressmen's and senators' support to keep suicide prevention and affordable mental health legislation a top issue. I left the conference feeling truly empowered, realizing that each one of us can make a difference through our involvement.

I met so many wonderful people that I look forward to making this journey to Washington, D.C. again next year. ♡

## My Husband's Suicide *continued from page 1*

sealed all of the windows of his beloved BMW.

I have wondered if he was angry. Maybe he was sad. Maybe he was so emotionally spent that the whole thing took on that sick humor that sometimes infects all tragedies: that everything is so screwed up you can't help but laugh. I hope and pray that he just felt peace—a peace that comes with knowing that you are about to end an incomprehensible burden of physical and emotional pain.

I try to find my own peace when I remember what he had with him when he died. I had to go through the car after they took him away. It was a task I insisted on doing alone. I did it as my girlfriends, Melina and Hope, were upstairs and packing up my life with Greg. It took me almost three days. I sat in the car and sobbed. I sat on the concrete where they found his body and sobbed. I cried and yelled and wailed until I couldn't even remember what it was like to not cry and yell and wail. I still have days like that.

As Greg made the decision to end his life, he decided to focus on the things that meant the most to him. How lucky I am that those things included me. Inside the car were the contents of our hope chest: pictures he loved most—of our wedding, my first fly-fishing lesson, our nieces. Then there were all the things that we had collected over more than seven years together—movie stubs, old plane tickets, matchboxes from restaurants and hotels, a dress of mine that he loved (and I didn't wear often enough), my perfume. I like to think that the last thought he had before he slipped away is the same one that I focus on—the moment he stood on the banks of the Roaring Fork River in Aspen with a gorgeous ring and tears in his eyes and the most romantic and perfect proposal I could ask for. It was perhaps our most perfect memory before the madness and pain and unpredictable behavior made life unbearable.

Greg's suicide really took on the flavor of his life. It was a dichotomy of simplicity in execution and complexity of effect. It was both tidy and a mess all at the same time. It was gentle and destructive simultaneously. Just like Greg. Letters he had written were neatly lined up on the dining room table. The dishwasher had been loaded. The laundry was piled in the hamper. Money was placed in envelopes. Instructions left for the police, the detectives, the friends that might find him. A sealed box in the middle, a simple note on his personalized stationery taped on top, gave an almost complete picture of what he prioritized: "For my wife. Please make sure that Kate gets this box. Thank you. Greg." Inside the box were two letters, cash, some pictures, and all his chips from AA. Three cumulative years of sobriety in a little wooden box. Letters, their contents too precious to share ver-

batim, which stated that the best gift I could give to him was to move on, be strong and find happiness. How hard I have tried and how difficult that has been.

We had a fight the night before he took his life. I had told him that he really needed to look into himself and figure out how he was going to put our life back together. Our home was in Colorado, and I was with my parents in California for an undetermined length of stay. I had been ill, and Greg couldn't take care of me because he couldn't take care of himself. He was slipping away, pushing me away, and I hit my limit. A car accident had left him in constant physical pain. Tack that on to a history of alcoholism, manic depression, and no therapy to deal with family issues, and the slip into madness was perhaps inevitable. He, so therefore, we, were having business, financial and legal problems. "I love you, Greg. I want this to work. But I need a husband that I can depend on. I need you to make an effort to get better. I need you to make a choice." And the choice he made will always affect me. It will be the voice inside my head for the rest of my life.

The simplicity of his suicide is found in the way that he died. Helium, to most people's surprise, can be fatal if inhaled in large quantities. Sometimes you pass out and all you are left with is brain damage. But add a running car and carbon monoxide to the mix and death is guaranteed.

The complexity of his death is seen in how much work it has taken to get my own life back on track. Suicide is perhaps the most difficult of deaths. The word alone will clear a room. People that I expected to be supportive disappeared. Strangers embraced me. Almost everyone had a pious platitude or opinion to offer, none that were of any help. If Greg's death has done anything for me, it's taught me to stand up for myself. Cut the crap out of my life. Not that I have ever tolerated a lot of crap, but I tolerate less now. I am more vocal. I tell you what I think—that alone has cost me friendships. I have been accused of changing. Well, yes. My life was ripped out from under me. Be worried if I didn't change.

I desperately miss Greg, my best friend and sounding board. I miss having a partner—that one person that I am supposed to come home to every night for the rest of my life. I miss having someone to share a code word with—the code word that signals it's time to leave the boring dinner party and go home and order pizza. I hate that I have entered the dating world again. I still find that I want to call Greg and ask his advice. I hate that I desperately want to find love again but am scared to death of finding it and having it ripped away from me all over again.

Yet, each day I find that I do what Greg asked me to do. In his exact words, from his last letter, "[I] put one foot in front of the other and smile as big as [I] can. Because life goes on. It's as simple as that." ♡

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## SURVIVORS AFTER SUICIDE NEWSLETTER

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