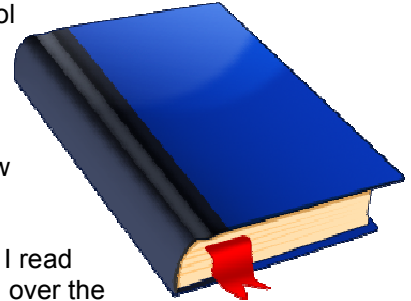


## Bittersweet: Loving and Losing a Son to the Disease of Addiction

### Summary

My only surviving child, Jim, died of an overdose of heroin and alcohol March 19, 2003 in Phoenix, Arizona. I'm writing a book for families who have lost a loved one to the disease of addiction. It is my prayer that together we can heal our hearts and offer support to those living with the struggle of this disease. Written from my perspective as a parent, there is a special emphasis intended to show the commonality of our experiences.



Having never written a book before, I've come to understand a quote I read some time ago: "Writing is easy; simply slit open a vein and bleed all over the page." This "bleeding" requires recovery time so the project is taking longer than I would like. However it is critical to me that I offer something worth reading. The intent of being brutally honest also requires contemplation and time. This is truly an adventure of spirit and love.

### The Story Begins

The first thing I wrote when Jim died was the *fourth* version of his eulogy. I had written three prior versions reading them to him in our darkest hours of this disease. Each time I purged demons of my own. Each time Jim looked deep into my eyes pleading with me to believe he could beat this disease. This is exactly what I wanted to believe; each time my hope was thinning out.

The second thing I wrote when Jim died was a poem: "What If Jim Is Dead and All Is Right In God's World?" I had begun a regular journal to capture the rampant and torturous thoughts, hoping to quiet the "what if's" and "if only's" that circled my mind ceaselessly. Occasionally I'd send something I wrote to other parents on this same journey. I began to hear, "you should write a book." But I am not an author and life was busy enough. I continued to journal, write poems and read everything I could that was written by other bereaved parents. None talked about death from this disease.

In 2007, an email was sent out looking for someone to offer a session at the annual Compassionate Friends (TCF) conference in Oklahoma City. The topic was "when a child dies from substance abuse." I jumped on the opportunity. While I had received good support from our local TCF chapter, Jim's death from the disease of addiction had its differences. I wanted to talk to other parents; I needed to connect.

Just like the reality of a child's death for any reason, death from a specific cause has its own realities. It wasn't cancer, a car accident, murder or allergies. And, the disease had been part of our lives for over 21 years. Racking my brain to figure out what to say, I took my usual direct route – here's our story, here's how it felt to me, to Tom and here's how we feel now. How about you?

Flying to Oklahoma I was excited and nervous. This was not an Al-Anon, NA or CODA meeting – this was being shoulder to shoulder with others who had been down similar paths. Would we connect? I was almost desperate to say something meaningful but was almost as desperate to simply be present ...in the same company with others who might share my pain, my doubts, my self judgments and my love for a son who no longer lives in body.

Carla Moore approached me as I began to set up in the front of the room. Introducing herself, she told me of her son Jason's death from methadone. She sponsored the room and was glad to do something in his memory. We hit it off immediately which helped calm me. Tom sat in the back handing out evaluation forms prepared to take pictures – I needed proof that I had actually stood up and spoken on this topic. I didn't trust my memory.

The room filled up – so many faces lined with tears - tissues at hand. So many faces filled with fear, apprehension sprinkled with skepticism. For the next hour I told **our** story – we laughed and cried together. Heads were shaking in familiar agreement; heads nodding in familiar pain and frustration. Wrapping up, Carla asked, "Have you written a book?" Shocked I almost got whiplash looking for Tom's face in the room. I stammered that I had been writing but wasn't sure if it was anything worth sharing with the world. Carla took the lead encouraging me and others in the room were equally vocal in support of the idea. "We need our story told, too"

Afterwards I was overwhelmed with the line of hugs and words of encouragement from tender moms with smeared make up, strong dads who swept me up into great bear hugs and a few siblings who want their sisters and brothers remembered with dignity. Having never written a book, I began researching, writing and learning. How could I do this on top of everything else in my life?

### The Birth of Wristbands

As the 2008 conference neared I wanted to bring something to help us find each other more readily. There is something I call the "Frank Effect" – so many parents suffering quietly wondering who else might be in similar shoes. Everyone attending a TCF event has lost children but how? Ultimately I had wristbands made. Choosing the phrase "No Shame or Blame – Just Love" in purple and green, I took 250 to Nashville. I figured either no one would want such an identifying band or I wouldn't have enough. I came home with only the one on my wrist.

In Nashville, the room was filled with familiar faces and many new ones – we were packed to capacity. Again the response was intense and clear – we share so many common elements within our separate experiences. And ... keep moving forward with "our book." More parents gave me pictures, email addresses and stories. And, sadly I took home more prayers cards. My prayer bowl holds purple cards for those who died and green cards for those living with this disease.

### The Book Takes Flight

I returned home determined to clear my schedule enough to dedicate significant effort to making this book come to life. The effort took center stage finally mid-December, 2008. **2009 is the Year of the Book!** Or so I planned. Yet again life conspired differently from my plans. I kept writing, kept collecting stories, emails and pictures of beloved children downed by this disease. Finding a need to closet myself to focus on the writing, I began divesting myself of various projects.



**Finally**, the book is taking shape – chapters identified and named, drafts organized, research being summarized and edits begun. **How might you participate?**

- **Memorial Section** - if you would like your child remembered in this section, please send me the following information:
  - First Name (or nickname); Age at Death; City, State of Residence; favorite hobby.

- We are not using full names or specific dates due to issues with identity theft. While various websites and published materials include such data, the effort here is to be as responsible to your identity welfare as possible.
- **No Shame or Blame – Just Love wristbands.** These are given out at no cost in honor and memory of Jim. They are readily available to any who desire them with the agreement that they never be sold. Simply email or write with your contact information, number of wristbands desired. I would love to know your child or loved one. **If desired**, please send me their picture and the above information to be posted on my picture board. Every day I look at these amazing faces; they inspire me to do more to reduce the shame and stigma of the disease of addiction.



- **Prayer Bowl** – using many different avenues of prayer (my own daily efforts, groups and prayer circles including Silent Unity), a purple card is used for those who have died from this disease and a green card for those alive and fighting for life. I glean this information from emails, news reports or direct requests. If so moved, send me your prayer requests.
- **My Blog** – This journey is never ending and always pressing me to learn more and more about many aspects of the disease. The blog is an effort to offer some of the more important learnings as I go along.
- **Questions, Suggestions** - If you have questions, suggestions or would like to be added to the parents contact list, please contact me:

[forwardflowing@comcast.net](mailto:forwardflowing@comcast.net) or,

8325 Fall Chill Court Ellicott City, MD 21043

***Thank you for your interest, support and prayers for this book!***

***You and your children matter to me!***

