



His Name Was Liam

LISA PICKER

My name is Lisa Picker. I have been a registered medical assistant for 33 years, serving first in pediatrics and now internal medicine. I love my job. It is my ministry. I have a loving husband and two beautiful daughters. This is not an easy story for me to retell. It has many layers, twists and turns, beginning very joyfully. It is graphic at times. For this I will not apologize. It is what we lived, and what he lived.

However painful, this story is a reminder that there was a little boy who suffered deeply. He was and remains one of the strongest people I have ever known. What he endured at times is beyond what most only can imagine. The essence of his life cannot be captured on a few sheets of paper. He was my heart. He was my joy. He was our youngest, our only son, and his name was Liam.

THE PHONE CALL

It was early October. I was settling in at my desk for the day, headset on and feet firmly planted, preparing for the flood of patient calls about to be unleashed. It seemed like any other day when my cell phone rang. I looked down, and it was Liam.

It wasn't unusual to get a call from him. He was at home and supposed to be studying. I answered.

"Hey bud, what's up?"

I remember a brief silence.

"Mom."

His tone sounded strangely flat.

"What's wrong, Liam?"

"Mom, I can't take it anymore."

"What do you mean, son?"

"I'm depressed, Mom. I can't take it anymore, Mom. I'm in the bathtub with a blow dryer. I am going to kill myself."

I pulled my headset off. Heart pounding, hands

shaking, I quickly made my way out the back door of the office.

"Liam," I said, "I don't know what is going on, but there is nothing so bad that you have to do this. Don't you do this, buddy. Did something happen? I'm leaving work now, I'll be there in a few minutes. Liam? You hear me? Stay on the phone with me. Don't you do this..."

"Bye, Mom."

Click! The phone went silent. With that, I frantically grabbed my things, told a co-worker and raced home. I was 25 minutes away. I called 911 and my husband. My thoughts were all over the place. Through my hysteria, I began praying, all the while I kept asking myself, "What would cause a child to want to end his life?"

Especially this way. Imagining the unimaginable, it seemed like some horrible movie or nightmare. I arrived home to find a flurry of first responders and concerned neighbors. I found Liam shivering in a corner in his wet, plaid boxers. Wet foot prints leading from the master bathroom where he sat in the water-filled tub for God knows how long.

This scene marked the beginning of an eight-year battle against Liam's disease. A battle he would eventually lose. The dictionary defines the word "suffering" as pain that is caused by injury,



illness or loss. Whether it is physical or emotional pain, I think we all can agree that suffering hurts, and pushed long and hard enough, you would do almost anything to end it.

To understand our family's suffering, you first have to understand his. Liam was a normal, happy little boy. He came into this world with dark brown hair and deep brown eyes. He was a sweet little guy, an easy baby and joyful child. He had plenty of friends, a mischievous laugh.

He sailed through most of his grade-school years, earning the citizenship award in the third grade for being kind and helpful. He enjoyed the things most boys do, playing basketball, skateboarding — oh, and there was always a steady flow of reptiles in and out of our house. Just creepy enough to keep his sisters on edge.

My first glimpse into Liam's complex makeup came when he was about 6. It was Easter time. The movie "The Passion of the Christ" was being released in theaters.

I was on the couch watching TV. Liam was sitting on the floor, one knee bent under him and one knee up, Head down, his thick brown hair almost covering his eyes. He was staring intently at his new Lego set, sorting the pieces meticulously into groups. A commercial advertising the movie suddenly appeared. Quickly moving through the parts of the story, it seemed to freeze at the scene depicting the crucifixion. There was Jesus, lying on the cross, arms stretched wide, feet overlapping. Blood and sweat dripped from his head. You know what is coming next: the sound of the hammer hitting the nails. Groans from a man in unimaginable pain. I scrambled to find the remote.

Without lifting his head, without taking his eyes off of his Legos, Liam uttered under his breath, "Boy, that must have hurt!" I sat there perplexed, not knowing what to think, but concluding that this little boy was taking in a lot of information and stimuli, all at once.

WITHDRAWAL AND CHANGES

Towards the end of his grade-school years, Liam began to withdraw from his friends. He started finding excuses not to attend birthday parties or sleepovers. School became a daily struggle, he seemed to become overwhelmed easily.

Liam began complaining of stomachaches. For the most part, a little TLC and a day at home with

Mom would cure this, but, in Liam's case, there seemed to be more to it. Headaches followed the stomachaches, and then came complaints of dizziness.

Concerned there might be something terrible that was wrong, we did what every parent does: We took him to the doctor, who ordered an MRI. We waited nervously for the results and were relieved when they returned normal.

After consulting with doctors and counselors, it was determined that Liam was suffering from generalized anxiety and was beginning to show signs of depression. Puberty was setting in, and that was complicating things for the already complicated young man. He was moody and irritable at times; angry, but never violent.

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No one can really pinpoint exactly when Liam began to change, but we have a photograph of him at around age 13. He is sitting in a chair, gazing out the window. There is a look on his face of distance and deep sadness.

Liam also began showing symptoms of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Cleanliness and order were very much at the forefront of his mind. He would not come downstairs if he saw an ant on the kitchen counter — strange coming from a boy who had two tarantulas and a snake in his room.

I began to find his socks strewn all over the house, later discovering the reason: Liam would come out of his room in the morning with a clean pair on, walk down the stairs to the living room and have to change into another clean pair.

He was guarded and measured about whom he allowed near him. If he thought someone was going to hug him, he would slip his hands into his sleeves so as not to touch them. Can you imagine what that might be like? To be locked inside a prison in your mind?

He also became very measured about who could come into his bedroom. His things were placed very neatly. He liked his bed and box spring on the floor. No bed frame. You had to ask permis-



sion to come in. If he thought someone had been in his room, he would get very upset. You could just look in his eyes and see the panic.

Liam was very intelligent. During one of his many counseling sessions, Liam's counselor said, "I bet if we tested your IQ, you would score off the charts."

Liam replied, "I think you are confusing articulation with intelligence."

The counselor and I looked at each other and just grinned. Point proven.

BEGINNING TO LOSE HOPE

Liam knew things were not right. He watched how his older sisters handled school and the normal challenges that come with growing up. He was a perfectionist and his own worst enemy. I always tell people, Liam was well enough to know how sick he was. No one wanted to feel normal more than Liam did. No one worked harder at achieving that than Liam did. This was the hardest part for us as a family: to see the turmoil and suffering he was going through. He was begging for help, and we could not seem to find the answers.

Liam researched his symptoms. He educated himself and was seeking answers — we all were. Unfortunately, OCD often causes extreme anxiety, and anxiety often leads to depression. Medications would help for a while, but we could never seem to get the right combination. The medications usually caused some type of side effect. He began taking one medication after another.

Collectively as a family, we were relentless in our pursuit to find answers for Liam. We read every book, explored every alternative. When it became clear Liam was not going to do well in the public school system, we began home-schooling him. My husband and I both taught him, juggling full-time work, making sure he got to his appointments and trying to care for our two daughters as well.

We kept hoping and praying for healing. We believe in God and knew he could heal Liam. All he had to do was just touch him. I think at one time, Liam was on every prayer chain in every church in the state.

He was such a trouper. He did everything asked of him, went to every counseling and doc-

tor appointment, took the medications he was prescribed. However after years of going up to the plate to bat and never hitting the ball, Liam was beginning to lose hope.

I remember a very gut-wrenching conversation I had with him. We were sitting on the couch, talking. Liam and I did a lot of talking. He was very comfortable with his mom; he shared things with me most teenage boys would not. I think he knew I loved him and would never judge him.

He said, "Mom, do you think I will feel better in a year?"

My heart dropped. I remember feeling so sad for him. Fighting back tears, I said, "Of course you are, bud. It's not going to take that long. This new medication, why, it should start kicking in any day. You are going to feel better soon. Soon, Liam. Just hang in there, buddy."

Liam had two passions in life. His first was the Japanese culture — I think he was drawn to the calm and gentleness of it. He chose Japanese as his foreign language to complete his home-school requirements. What kid does that? A really smart kid. He taught himself to read, write and, on a limited basis, speak the language.

His second love was playing the piano. This came as quite a surprise to us. After our oldest daughter expressed some interest in taking piano

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lessons, we purchased a shiny black, baby grand piano. Her interest lasted all of two months, and we were stuck with this beautiful piano and no one to play it. I loved just sitting and gazing at that piano. I was drawn to it and could not entertain the thought of selling it. It was waiting for someone. Someone special. It would remain silent for 13 years.

I remember the first time I heard Liam play the piano. He sat down one day, and out it poured. No music books. No formal lessons. Just raw, unbridled talent. It was obvious he had a gift, for both playing and composing music. At Liam's funeral,

his piano teacher would describe her first lesson with Liam. She said, “When I take a new student, I always sit down next to them and just let them play, to get a feel for their skill level.”

Her eyes filled with tears. She said, “The first time I sat down next to Liam, I knew I was sitting next to greatness.”

The years between the first phone call I got at work that October day and the cold February morning eight long years later, when Liam finally ended his suffering, were riddled with the struggles of a young man and a family trying to find help and healing. I think Liam was here a lot longer than he really wanted to be. This type of suffering did not build character or emotional muscle. He lived with and endured an illness he did not ask for.

Our last conversation took place in my bedroom, just two days before he died. My husband was working hard to get Liam approved for transcranial magnetic stimulation therapy, a series of treatments for depression that stimulate nerves in the brain. Liam was nervous about it. As he laid his head in my lap, he began to cry.

“Mom, I am scared. I’m scared these treatments are going to change my personality.”

“Oh no, son, you are confused. You are thinking about ECT [electroconvulsive therapy]; this is different. The only thing this will change is, hopefully, your mood.”

“Mom, what’s wrong with me? I can’t take much more, Mom.”

With tears streaming down my cheeks, I was praying: “Please, God, I cannot bear to see him like this, and he can’t take the suffering much longer.”

Two days later, we arose early to get ready to take Liam to several appointments. We discovered our son, and our hearts broke. Sometime in the night, he had decided he could not go on. The

weight of his illness, the years of struggling and the absence of hope proved a fatal combination. Liam ended his suffering on Feb. 13, 2015. He was 18.

A STORY WITH MANY CHAPTERS

I share Liam’s story when given the opportunity. As I said earlier, it is a story with many chapters, and this telling barely covers the surface. The physical and emotional suffering Liam experienced as a result of his illness were just part of many other issues.

For instance, there were inappropriate, often compassionless ways Liam was treated by several mental health care facilities in our city. Fortunately, after discussions with one of the facilities, they have adopted new procedures on how they approach children upon admission. My passion and Liam’s experience are directly responsible for this change.

But that’s just the beginning. Not once was my son ever offered a stuffed animal or anything comforting during any of his hospital stays. No famous athletes or celebrities came to visit Liam. The facilities he stayed in looked more like drab cell blocks than places of hope and healing.

I will not rest until our children and their families have a place to go that provides hope — real hope. Maybe that can happen when our mental health care is no longer routinely referred to as behavioral health. You see, Liam did not have a behavior problem, he was a victim of mental illness.

Given the chance, I will continue to address the stigma around mental health and suicide. You see, Liam did not take his life. His illness took his life.

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