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'No one could help me': Young man unable to escape the grip of anorexia

By Louise Knott Ahern

For the Lansing State Journal

In one photo, the one she wears as a locket around her neck, her son is a grinning, chubby-cheeked toddler.

In the others, the ones she discovered in a lockbox after he died, he is a shrinking skeleton.

Growing more and more gaunt with every self-portrait until the sharp points of ribs and collarbone poke visibly, painfully against skin. Until the place where there was once a six-pack of abs becomes nothing but a hollowed-out space. Until his full head of hair grows thin and patchy with baldness. Until the boy who once stood with athletic pride is hunched, barely possessing the strength to hold the camera.

Okemos' Susan Barry cries as she reveals each photo.

"Why would he do this?" she asks. "Why would he take these pictures of himself and then hide them?"

Then she answers her own question.

"He wanted me to find these. He was telling me, 'Help people, Mom. Because no one could help me.' "

A dozen years ago, Susan had no idea boys could suffer from anorexia. Not until her then-14-year-old son, TJ Warschefsky, removed his shirt at a backyard pool party and revealed a frame so suddenly thin, she immediately got him into therapy.

It was the beginning of a nine-year ordeal that ended Valentine's Day 2007, when TJ did sit-ups in his Milwaukee apartment until his heart gave out - one last gasp in a body wracked by years of starvation. He was 22. He weighed 78 pounds.

Susan discovered after he died that he left behind journals, poems and pictures. Together, they offer raw insight into what might be driving a rise in male eating disorders, frustrations about a medical community that seemed ill-equipped to deal with his problem, and the fears of one young man who felt powerless to stop.

Now, two years after his death, his mother is on a mission to share her son's words and tragic journey to help the victims of eating disorders we rarely hear about - boys.

Painful memories

She sits on the floor of her bedroom, a damp tissue crumpled in her hand. Scattered around her knees are his photos, now mixed with her own pictures from over the years.

TJ clowning around with his younger sister, Jessica, and his step-father, John, at a family event.

A healthy TJ after he gained 30 pounds during one of his four stints in a residential treatment center.

A shockingly thin TJ at Christmas 2006, less than two months before he died.

An even thinner TJ, showing the camera where dark, fuzzy hair had begun to sprout along his skinny arms, his body's primal defense against the cold of starvation.

That photo was taken, Susan believes, the day he died.

"This isn't my son," she says, running her fingers up and down his arm as if still trying to comfort him, or maybe herself.

In so many ways, she's right. The young man in the photo is nothing like the TJ everyone knew outside of the eating disorder that controlled him.

He was a motivated self-starter who got straight A's and played sports. He attended church twice a week, helped his neighbors mow their lawns and once refused a challenge to say a swear word, just once, for money. If he set a goal, he achieved it. When he settled on a career in dentistry, he received scholarship offers from all three branches of the United States military. He chose the Air Force; TJ later was rejected - according to a letter from the Air Force - because of his low weight.

But even after that fall, he pulled himself up and got into the dental program at Marquette University in Milwaukee.

"I know so many parents say that their children are perfect," Susan says, "but I really did have the perfect son. He had so much going for him. He lost so much because of the eating disorder. He could do anything he wanted, but he couldn't do this."

'Nobody knew'

It started around eighth grade, TJ wrote in an essay found on his computer. My friends started to talk about six-packs and muscles. Girls were becoming more of an attraction than a distraction. I had always been the best, smartest, most athletic, and this was just my newest challenge. It began in a healthy way - doing a reasonable amount of sit-ups and push-ups. When the girls would touch my rock-hard abs and be super impressed, it brought such a feeling of satisfaction. I needed more.

"Everybody liked him," says Ashley Scott, one of TJ's closest friends from Okemos and whom TJ referred to as his girlfriend. "Everybody wanted to be around him. He was honest and loyal, the perfect friend to everyone."

They became really close their senior year at Okemos High School. They had inside jokes and little traditions, like hitting Baskin-Robbins together. Nonfat yogurt for TJ.

They're good memories, but they're also tainted. Ashley can't help but reexamine every minute she spent with TJ and wonder if she could have done something to help him.

"Nobody knew," she says. "But he was obsessively working out. ... Everybody knew that. And everybody knew that he had different eating habits. We used to go to Michigan State football games together, and when we would tailgate, he would just eat the veggies or fruit, and then he would say that he had eaten before he got there or something.

"When I would be with him, I would conform to his habit. I would adjust my portions or my meal or whatever because I felt like I wasn't being as healthy as he was. So this whole time that people were thinking he was in such good shape and so healthy, we didn't know what was really happening behind the scenes."

I knew I was in trouble when I took my girlfriend to a restaurant that was two hours away for a special dinner and movie after. They offered many low-fat selections, but I absolutely had to have the no-fat option if it was available. So as a 17-year-old man, I ordered a chicken salad with fat-free ranch dressing (hold the chicken, croutons, and cheese). My entire meal probably added up to 100 calories. I sat and watched my beautiful, healthy girlfriend order chicken fingers and fries. I'm not even going to say the excuse that I made up for ordering what I did.

If one of her girlfriends had exhibited the same behaviors, would Ashley have realized what was happening?

"There's not a doubt in my mind."

The year 2000 was my Sweet 16th birthday. I was supposed to be weighed the morning of my birthday, but convinced my mom to let me do it the following day. ... I didn't eat all day because we were going out for a birthday dinner and then dessert. I had to eat a lot to show my parents that I was okay (who was I fooling?). On the same token, I had a big varsity tennis match the following day which I could not play in unless I made weight that morning. After the dinner, I stepped on the scale to see if I was going to make it. I was way far away after skipping two meals earlier in the day ...

He spent the next two hours eating. Cereal. Apples. Juice. Half his cake. His body couldn't take the binge.

Everything I had eaten that night came out. By no means had I "purged" or done it on purpose (I never did that), but I was so stuffed that it was forced out of me. I yelled for my mom and we both spent over an hour on the cold bathroom floor that night bawling our eyes out. Neither of us had an answer for this awful disease. Did anybody?

For a long time, Susan struggled to reconcile one side of her son with the other. But she knows now the side she didn't recognize - the one that prompted him to lie about how much he ate or to sneak out to exercise - was the effect of the eating disorder.

The disease held him in a baffling chokehold of contradictions. He hated the anorexia, but he went to extreme lengths to protect it. He hated the gaunt, skeletal image in the mirror, but he obsessed over every single pound gained or lost.

He wanted to stop. He couldn't.

I see puffy eyes, gray teeth, skeleton face, he wrote in March 2005. I hate that. I can't stand how I look. But the other part of that is I like so much the satisfaction I get from doing what I do.

People didn't understand why TJ couldn't get better, Susan says. Even their friends and family would get frustrated. But, as Susan puts it, it was like trying to tell someone with bipolar disorder to only be the happy side of their personality.

"That's just not possible," she says.

Roommate

It is so shameful for a male to have an eating disorder. Not one of my friends had a clue during the entire time it was going on. My parents and my psychiatrist told my coaches about the situation, and said that there might be times when I am unable to play because of my weight, but to make up an injury so my friends didn't find out. I had never met another guy who had this.

Daniel Hollander is on his cell phone from Washington, D.C., where he's a student at George Washington University. He knows, probably better than anyone, what TJ went through. Not just because they were best friends. They were roommates - twice - at Roger's Memorial Hospital in Milwaukee, one of the only treatment centers in the country that offers an all-male program.

"In the beginning, I didn't even know I had anorexia," Daniel says. "So much of what you hear about anorexia is that it's a girl's disease. ... And if you go into treatment and you're the only guy there, it just reinforces the idea that this is a girl's disease, and you feel even more alone."

TJ and Daniel hit it off immediately. They had so much in common. Normal stuff. Guy stuff. Stuff besides the eating disorder.

"I trusted him as much as I could trust a person," Daniel says. "When he left that second time, I really thought he would make it. ..."

"But we ended up back in treatment together again. That time, he was only there a little over a month. He was adamant about leaving because he wanted to start dental school on time. I was scared to death to see him leave. He wasn't ready, physically or emotionally. He assured me he would be fine. He left in August. By February, he was dead."

A few months after TJ died, Daniel went back to Roger's. He stayed six months. He says he's doing well.

"I'm recovering," he says, careful to avoid the word cured. "I still have hard days. I still have urges, and there are still struggles that come up. I'm better equipped than ever before."

He thinks about TJ's funeral almost daily.

"The minister was giving the eulogy," Daniel says. "He was saying that as tragic as the situation was, if just one person could learn something from this, if one person could somehow get better and get help and learn from what happened to TJ, then at least there could be a small silver lining. Susan came up to me afterwards and said, 'He was speaking to you. I didn't tell him to say that, but he was speaking to you.'"

It was mid-February 2007. Susan was visiting family in Florida with her daughter, Jessica.

She hadn't talked to TJ in a couple of days. His last phone message was longer than normal; he had laughed and told her about a nice old lady in his apartment building who brought him a banana and a Coke because she obviously thought he needed food.

TJ was supposed to call Susan on Valentine's Day. But when the agreed-upon time came and went with no word, she just knew.

She called the Marquette security office and asked them to check on her son. She went to bed that night with her cell phone clutched to her chest, praying TJ would call.

The phone rings

When the phone finally rang, it was after 2 a.m. She heard a voice say, "Mrs. Barry, this is Father Patrick from Marquette ... "

She screamed.

There are so many things that anger Susan, so many ways she feels the system failed TJ.

She says she tried everything she could. Counselors. Encouragement. Tough love. Punishment. Residential treatment centers; he was in and out four times.

"So many times, I felt like I was just standing there and screaming, 'Why can't somebody help me?' ... As many as one in five eating disorder sufferers are males, but there are only a couple of residential centers for men. We got him into one center, and he was the only boy there. He hated it."

Even when they discovered Roger's, it was \$850 a day.

"TJ would go, and he would gain just as much weight as was necessary, and then he would be released, and he would immediately start all over again ... "

Her voice trails off.

Susan shares another photo. It's a picture of his black, granite gravestone.

If love could have saved you, the inscription reads, you would have lived forever.

She visits him every day.

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