



June 3, 2019

## Testimonial

On November 23, 2014 I was in the middle of packing when the phone rang. On the other end I heard a stern voice asking me if I was the mother of Richard Brennan Tatem. It was at that moment that I knew something was horribly wrong. My heart sank as I responded with a "yes". The voice proceeded to inform me that my son was dead and that he had hung himself in his room. I screamed and dropped the phone. It seemed as if an eternity passed before I picked the phone up and choked out the words, "I will call you back in a few minutes". My children and I will never forget that phone call. My daughter has shared that she is haunted by the sound of my scream. No mother should ever find out that her child has passed in such a manner. **(This is why a post-vention program is vital)** I flew to Malibu on the first flight out and was greeted by the Dean of Students and his assistant. They were kind and even planned a Celebration of Brennan's life to be held that evening, before the students left for Thanksgiving break, but none of that mattered at that moment. All I wanted to do was hold my son. All I wanted to do was tell him how sorry I was for not knowing the depth of his pain and not being there to hold him while he was suffering.

Now that I have shared how I received the news, let me tell you a little about who Brennan Tatem was. Brennan was a gifted and talented singer and actor. He was the lead in his school plays and was a ringer in Aladdin. He was always helping others and he was always pushing himself to be the best. Brennan had a full class schedule, was pledging for a fraternity, was singing in three choirs which meant he spent 20 hours a week practicing and was feeding the homeless in LA on Saturdays. When he received a B, he had no idea how to handle it. Our generation has not done any favors for our children by allowing them all to receive a trophy and lying to them and telling them that they all are fantastic. They need to learn how to fail. You and I can look at this scenario and understand why he didn't receive a perfect report. He had taken on an amount of responsibilities that would be too much for anyone. But Brennan couldn't understand this. To him, he was a complete failure. His biggest fear in life had become real. At the time of his death, I had no idea that he, and many other college students, live with this fear daily. This fear cripples them at times and allows for anxiety to move in and make itself comfortable. In many instances, this fear and anxiety open the door to the monster that we call "SUICIDE". Brennan was gifted but it was his brilliance that allowed for him to see the world in such a negative way. In one of his writings he titled his paper, "Is Intelligence the Key to Sadness" and after four years of helping other students at all hours of the night, I believe he had a valid question.

Throughout high school, Brennan excelled. He was loved by all, played many sports and was even chosen for homecoming and prom court. He was in charge of the fundraisers held at his private school and he was always the student that they would put in front of the cameras for news interviews. Although he loved the arts, he was very interested in politics. He had a plan mapped out from point A to Z. He would start at Pepperdine, move on to the law school located on the Pepperdine campus and secure a profession as an international corporate attorney. He would purchase a vacation apartment in Dubai and enter into politics. He had his eye on the presidency. Why do I share this with you? Because I want you to understand who Brennan Tatem was and how his mind functioned. I want you to understand this, not just because he is my son but because I talk to college students weekly, all

sharing that they feel these same feelings and many are suicidal in thought. Brennan was on a full scholarship and was given \$68,000 a year. Many of these students are in debt due to their student loans, and have great anxiety because of this.

So how did these students, and others, get my phone number, facebook information and email? It all began on that horrible day when I flew into California and took the tortured filled drive into Malibu. The drive that was once so thrilling and beautiful was now filled with excruciating pain and felt like an eternity. I went directly to his room and almost lost my grounding when I saw the crime scene tape around the door. A large sign was posted on the front and nothing had been moved. Once I opened the door, I couldn't find his wallet or his phone. I contacted the detective and was informed that it had been taken to the morgue. I couldn't get in the car fast enough and I headed out on a drive, that remains a fog to me. Once I arrived at the morgue, I believed that I would be able to see my beautiful son; That I would be able to wrap my arms around him and sing to him just like when he was a little boy. I thought that once I had my arms around him that I would feel some comfort only to find that in California, you have to wait until your loved one is at a funeral home in order to see them. So as I googled a funeral home, I cried and felt as if I could no longer breathe. I was drowning in my own tears and I couldn't stop it. Nobody around me seemed to care. I felt isolated and in a nightmare. I signed in and headed to the window where a grumpy lady gave me some forms to sign and slid my son's phone and wallet along with a goodbye letter, under a glass window. I held that letter for a few minutes but the minutes seemed like hours. I walked out into the sunshine and began to read my son's words: "Mom, I love you more than anything. I know that this is going to be painful for you but I am done with my pain. Please help my friends and others that are suffering like I was. I love that you help other people and I am proud of you" .....Proud of me? How could he be worried about me or proud of a mother who missed many of the signs that he was showing? **(This is why education has become a big part of my agenda on helping to stop suicide)**

How did I find out about his depression? In July of 2014, my son was on a trip to Prague. He was chosen as a non-music major and a freshman going into his sophomore year. This was unheard of in the history of Pepperdine. What took place next I was not prepared for. My phone began to receive multiple texts. One after the other, my son was describing an unbearable pain. There I was; confused because I was clueless. Sure, he came home for visits and appeared to be losing weight and agitated, but I wrote that off to college life. I had no clue. I was able to talk him into calling me and it was then that I heard him say these words that will never ever leave my heart: "Mom, I love you very much but the train is getting ready to come and I am going to step in front of it. I am done with this pain mom and I know you will be ok. I love you". I was able to talk him into coming home and I got him in to see a doctor where he was placed on medication. We were told that we would start with one at a lower dose and work our way up. I felt confident that the doctor had a good idea of what was needed and went along with the diagnosis. Two weeks later my son begged me to allow for him to return to college. He stated that his depression would only get worse if he was forced to leave his path altogether. I was reluctant but I agreed with the stipulation that he would see a psychiatrist right away, and he did. What I didn't know is that this doctor, who had practiced at Pepperdine University in the past, was nothing more than a pill pusher. The students referred to him as Dr. Addy. Brennan trusted this doctor and allowed for him to prescribe a total of four very strong medications. He didn't counsel Brennan but simply kept pushing the pills. There is so much to this story that I can't share at this time but I would be happy to explain why I am screaming from the rooftops that we have to have more doctor accountability. We need to have a paper trail of what was given last and how the patient is responding; especially our youth. In the end, the medication killed my son. I don't have proof but I know this in my heart. He journaled and took photos and left writings and I can see the spiral quickly starting at the end of August and getting worse as the days went on. The day before my son took his own life and became a victim of suicide, he contacted the doctor and begged for help. The doctor simply told him that he was calling in another prescription and that he would see him on Wednesday, after his vacation. He didn't have him dial 911 or the local police. He didn't refer him to the ER. No, what that doctor did was seal my son's fate. One of Brennan's last writings was titled, "The More I Pray the Further from God I Feel". We are a strong Christian family and for my son to write these words meant that total darkness had flooded his world. He believed that there was no longer any hope. He tried to get help but the

system failed him. **(This is why we need to hold doctor's more accountable and have a large penalty for those who do not follow the regulations)**

Prior to allowing my son to return to college, I contacted the counseling department and I was assured that they would work closely with my son and that they would check on him. What they didn't follow through with was to have my son fill out a form that would allow for them to contact me if they were concerned about his well-being. Although they were seeing some signs of his depression getting worse and he stopped coming by the counseling center, I could not be contacted. **(This is why we need to fight for change; that a parent can be notified if the student's life is in danger)**

Up until now I have shared why I have joined forces in fighting the suicide crisis that we are under. I currently have a senior in high school, Grant Besler, who is in a battle with depression. He has been in partial inpatient at Strong 2 times in the past 18 months and has been at the breaking point on many occasions. I have learned where there is a huge deficit and where we have strengths in Ontario County. I have seen and heard about insurance issues, lack of hospital beds, long waiting periods to see a trained counselor/therapist and more.

I would love to have the opportunity to share stories from people who have contacted me for assistance and what I have found to be helpful. I would also like to share what I see that needs to be addressed ASAP and the reasoning behind my suggestions.

On a different note: from a lived experience with my son Grant and others that are reaching out, it is vital that our legislators find funding to allow for a trained therapist to be in every high school, five days a week. Our school counselors are busy talking to students about grades and testing and of course, college. They do not have the time that these students require. **(There must be a policy put into place with requirements on mental health training)**

When I meet with you at the hearing, I will have a packet for everyone that will contain some bullet points that I feel are vital to helping to fight this crisis that we are under. I will include information about our local Suicide Prevention Coalition, local statistics, letters written from members of the SOS or Suicide Loss support group that I facilitate. I will include fliers on our support groups in the area and much more. If you have any questions, I would be happy to talk with you via phone, email or I would be happy to meet in Albany again if that would be easier.

I lost an amazing young man and the world is missing out on this incredible soul. I speak to young people like my Brennan, daily. All are in a huge struggle and most are either struggling with the fear of failure or with their sexual identity. I didn't touch base on the LGBTQ issues but I would like to have a discussion about this at the hearing if time permits.

Thank you for allowing me to share my own personal story. I tried to touch on the topics I am interested in as I was sharing my son Brennan's painful journey and my son Grant's current struggles. Since my son passed I have started a support group for adults and suicide loss; started a support group for teens who struggle with depression, anxiety and loss; co-founded a homeless initiative and became a field advocate with the AFSP. I provide a "Talk Saves Lives" presentation that is an introduction to signs to watch for and education on what to do next. Because I am so involved, I believe that I will be an asset to the ongoing conversation.

Thank You.

Donna Besler-Tatem